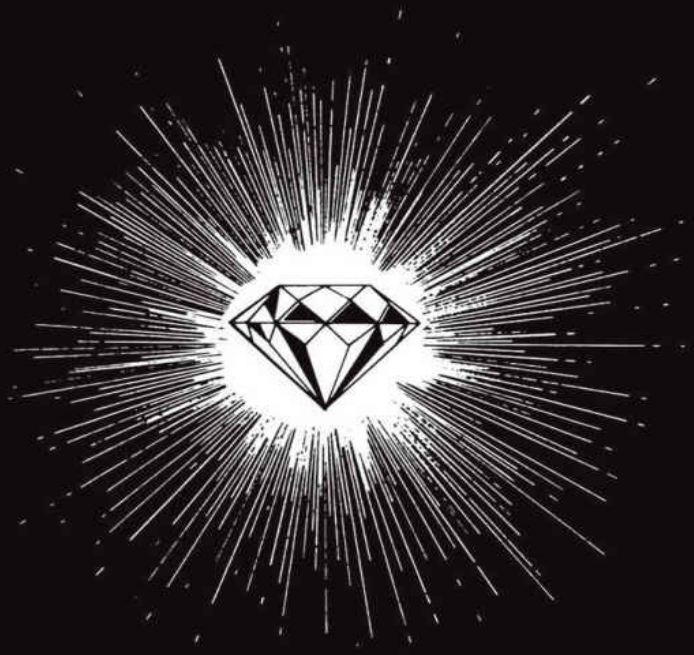
RASHMI BANSAL

SHINE BRIGHT



Inspiring stories of CEOs who are intrapreneurs

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

SHINE BRIGHT

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who are intrapreneurs

RASHMI BANSAL

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Dedicated to Shefali Srivastava
Bachpan ki saheli, forever a true friend

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I grew up on the leafy campus of TIFR (Tata Institute of Fundamental Research) in South Bombay.

Well, scientists, you know—those brainy people who peer through a microscope or telescope. Scribble complicated equations on the blackboard and even walk up and down the seaside by the campus, trying to solve them. Many a bush-shirt and lungi-clad uncle fit that stereotype.

But modern science is not a solitary endeavour, and more so in the area of Experimental Physics.

The Hubble telescope, a joint project by NASA and the European Space Agency, was launched in 1990, at a cost of $1.5 billion (or $3 billion in today's terms). Such a powerful telescope, located outside the earth's atmosphere, yielded never-before seen images of the far universe.

How could an Indian scientist ever hope to compete? By thinking differently.

In the year 2000, an X-ray astronomer from TIFR submitted a proposal for AstroSat—India's first dedicated astronomy satellite. His idea was simple: to collect new data on distant cosmic objects through multiple sets of 'eyes'.

While the Hubble telescope was best in its class, it could observe only a limited wavelength.

AstroSat would carry 5 precision-calibrated instruments to perform observations across optical, UV, and soft X-ray and hard X-ray wavelengths. All these instruments were to be engineered in India, by our scientists, on a slim budget of ₹180 crores ($27 million).

Not a champion batsman but a formidable all-rounder.

It was bold, audacious, a little 'mad'. K Kasturirangan—then ISRO Chairman—enthusiastically supported the idea and sanctioned initial seed funding. But it was only in 2004 that the Union Cabinet formally sanctioned the project and work could begin, full swing.

There were numerous technical challenges. In layman terms, the instruments had to be lightweight, with no possibility of leakage. Delicately crafted, fabricated in perfect alignment. And yet able to withstand shock and vibration, at the time of launch.

Project teams from TIFR, Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA), Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Raman Research Institute and ISRO Satellite Centre worked tirelessly, in mission mode. Finding solutions to problems, stretching scarce resources.

Staying focussed and motivated—despite endless delays.

On 28 September 2015, AstroSat was launched into orbit from Sriharikota, by PSLV C30. But the moment of reckoning was yet to come. Would the instruments actually work? *Anything* could go wrong! Just one tiny part, one loose wire, one wrong calibration…

There was jubilation, celebration and a sigh of relief when it all came together, perfectly.

3 years on, AstroSat has delivered valuable scientific data and a better picture of the

complex, ever-changing universe. What's more, 75% of viewing time is open to Indian and foreign astronomers, making it a truly open and democratic scientific resource.

I am telling you this story, which seems to have nothing to do with business and entrepreneurship, because, it resonates so deeply with the theme of this book.

In the world of science, the one who leads the project is known as the Principal Investigator. The scientist who wrote the proposal for AstroSat—and became its guiding force—was Dr Prahlad Chandra Agrawal. He is my hero, my father.

Working in start-up mode within a large organisation is as much a team effort—or even more so—than an actual start-up. Many, many scientists, engineers, technicians and other support staff were bound together by the glue of 'greater glory for science'.

No one was paid an incentive or overtime. They just did it because they wanted to.

What I admire the most is the perseverance of the AstroSat team. 15 years from the time the idea was conceived, to the time it became a reality.

In fact, the Principal Investigator was technically on the verge of retirement. But that didn't stop him from taking a shot at his dream. And look at the magic that happened.

The long and short of it is that it is never too early, never too late, to try and make a difference.

A start-up is not necessarily a place with beanbags and a team with an average age of 23.

Amazing things are possible in the private sector, in the public sector, in the social sector, in the government sector. When people are inspired to 'do more' and 'be more'.

When there is freedom to do things that have never been done. And sometimes, fail in the process.

When there is a sense of ownership—without being an actual owner—work becomes a Calling.

Find your calling. And you will bloom, you will grow.

Rashmi Bansal
March 2019

Section 1
SRISHTI

In the beginning was the Vision, and the Vision was with the entrepreneur. To make it a reality he brought on board a professional who shared that dream. A person who would be a co-Creator.

PAWAN GOENKA

Mahindra Auto

He started life as a research scientist but went on to lead a start-up project within a large, Indian family-owned company. The company bet its entire future on this project—a big risk!—but one which has paid off magnificently. Under Pawan Goenka's able leadership, Mahindra Auto now competes with global giants—and outperforms them.

CAR SEVA

You are driving in the fast lane, enjoying the wind in your hair. The scenery is beautiful, the road is smooth and endless. Your loved ones are with you—it's a very pleasant ride.

For Pawan Goenka, that was life in America, as a research scientist with General Motors. Until, one fine day, he gave it all up to travel down a dirt path.

Because, that dirt was *apne desh ki mitti*. Calling him to return.

"I want you to set up a world-class R & D centre for Mahindra," said Anand Mahindra. And against all advice, Pawan Goenka accepted.

He had no idea what he had signed up for….

In 1993, the Mahindra R & D centre in Nasik was a small, two-storey building, with 50 employees.

"Oh my gosh, is this it?" said Pawan.

So, what do you do when you've traded in your Ferrari, for a scooter that needs kickstart?

You decide to build a better scooter, and then a car. Not just any car, a *great* car. The kind your country needs.

People say—it's not possible. No Indian company can do this. You prove them wrong.

Ek system ke andar se kuch karke dikhana—that is intrapreneurship. That is the story of Dr Pawan Goenka. Making new things happen within the old. Of bringing in ideas, big and bold.

Of trial and error, teamwork and toil. Keeping it burning—that midnight oil.

Today, Mahindra Auto sells more than half a million passenger and commercial vehicles annually.

With world-class research centres in India and the US.

So, if a dirt path beckons, do not be afraid. These are the paths, where history is made.

Pawan Goenka was born in a very small village called Harpalpur, on the border of UP and MP.

"Nobody has ever heard of it. I lived there with my grandfather—we called him Bapuji—till the age of 7. There was no electricity in the village at that time."

Marwaris had migrated to many parts of India, to small towns and kasbahs. Pawan's great-grandfather had chosen Harpalpur, where he became a trader, known for his fairness and honesty.

"We lived in a house that had been gifted to our family by the maharajah… so I hear."

However, Pawan's father wanted 'more' out of life and went to Kolkata to do his BCom. There, he took a job with a tea company. Though it paid modestly, Pawan never felt deprived of anything.

"Only much later, I realised my parents struggled towards the end of each month."

Pawan was the eldest child, followed by 3 younger brothers. All of them studied at the nearby Jain Vidyalaya, a Hindi-medium school. And all of them excelled in studies, standing first in class.

"So my parents never paid the fees (which was ₹20 back then). We got a tuition waiver throughout!"

In those days the system of education was 10 + 1. A year before the final board exam, Pawan's father asked him, "What do you want to do now?" Although there was no engineer in the family, somehow, Pawan had decided to become one. It was then that his father suggested he sit for the IIT exam.

It was a very tough exam for Pawan, even though he was a good student. Because it was the first time he was answering a paper in English, questions *hi samajh nahi aa rahe the.*

In the end, the 16-year-old scraped through, securing a rank of 900. He was the last candidate to qualify for a Mechanical Engineering seat at the prestigious IIT Kanpur. Then, too, he almost failed the medical test. Weighing a mere 33 kgs—as against the stipulated 41 kgs—Pawan was so nervous when the doctor examined him, his heartbeat became 'too fast'.

"I had to produce a certificate from a government hospital stating I had no heart problem…"

Pawan would have preferred to join IIT Kharagpur. But in the 1970s, the Naxalite movement in Bengal had created an anti-Marwari feeling. So off he went to Kanpur on the Kalka Mail, a long way from home. Where he felt like a fish out of water, more so because of his poor English. During ragging by seniors he was asked, "When did you come here?"

> *I was a serious student but did I kill myself trying to get a higher grade point average? No, I used to take enough time out.*

Translating '*kal aaya tha*' in his head, he said, "I came here tomorrow."

It was a miserable few weeks; nothing made sense to Pawan's desi eyes and ears. He couldn't even follow the lectures in class. But then, two things happened. *Ek toh apne andar ka junoon*. '*Kar ke dikhana hai*, going back home is not an option.' And second, help and support from professors. As many students came from vernacular medium, they were given

extra after-class tutorials.

"Slowly I got the hang of things and my grades started improving."

By the end of year 3, Pawan was at the top of his class. And fully immersed in the IIT way of life. He started playing badminton, table tennis and a whole lot of bridge.

"Much later I realised it was more than a card game… bridge sharpened my memory, my thinking and ability to connect the dots!"

Overall, IIT Kanpur was an extraordinary place with some of the best teachers, in every field. Pawan recalls Prof Davenport (world-renowned in the field of Chemistry), Prof Mallick (a young chap who taught Kinematics), Prof Stokes (Thermodynamics), Prof Ghosh (famous for his absent-mindedness) and Prof Dhupar (his project advisor).

Pawan fondly recalls his final year group project: a Coke-dispensing machine. A futuristic concept at the time. It was touch and go during the trials but somehow did work on the day of the demo (the only time it worked!).

It is a series of small struggles and small victories that play a big role, in shaping a man's mind.

"So I think IIT education set a foundation that has worked for me all my life. It is not about the course work but the way you think, the way you do things, the way you approach a problem."

In those days, all BTech courses at IIT were for 5 years, of which the first 3 years were common and the last 2 years specific to your branch. So you had a good foundation in engineering as a whole, not just your specialisation. Another unique aspect was that each student had to complete 6–7 humanities courses.

"The fundamentals of Economics that I learned in IIT Kanpur are still with me. It's the only Economics course that I ever took!"

In his final year, like most of his classmates, Pawan decided to go to the US for further studies. In the days before the internet and email, every application was sent by post. A student would first send the university a 'pre-application'. The university would then mail you an application form. When he didn't hear back from Cornell for several weeks, Pawan sent off a second pre-application.

Soon after, he got this cryptic response to the first pre-application: 'Sorry you don't qualify'. But, for reasons best known to itself, the university did send a form based on his second request.

"I always tell people that I got into Cornell thanks to the Indian Postal Service!" jokes Pawan.

For destiny must shake hands with dreams, to make them come true.

From Harpalpur to Kolkata to Kanpur and now, on to America. Something very ordinary today but extraordinary in those times, for a middle-class family.

"Papa could not afford my flight ticket… it was paid for by a charitable trust."

His father's employer, Mr Kanoi, gave the young man his old suit, saying it might come in handy.

Though Pawan never wore it, it hung in his closet for many, many years.

"A reminder of my humble beginnings…"

America was a complete culture shock. When the newly arrived Indian student landed in New York City and asked for a ticket to Ee-tha-ka, the man at the counter could not follow his accent.

"There is no such place," he said, in exasperation.

Finally, Pawan wrote the name of the city on a piece of paper and a ticket to Ithaca was issued.

Adjusting to a completely new culture wasn't easy but luckily, there were three other students from IIT Kanpur at Cornell that year. They stayed together and that helped with

settling in.

"We made khana, washed bartans, even cut each other's hair. My specialty was making chapatis!"

Pawan's main pain point continued to be 'spoken English'. Luckily, his thesis advisor, Prof Jack Booker, was very understanding, and supportive.

"Since my TOEFL score was low, he offered me a research assistantship rather than a teaching assistantship. And that worked out very well for me!"

Pawan was working in the field of Tribology. Unlike at IIT, here the focus was more on research and thesis work. His Master's thesis was on the lubrication of spherical bearings, while the PhD took the idea a step further. It focussed on the lubrication of artificial hip-joints, i.e., how to design the joint to get as close as possible to natural lubrication.

While pursuing his PhD, Pawan played a lot of bridge and travelled around the US, to compete in various championships. He also learnt swimming, skiing and ballroom dancing.

Despite these distractions, Pawan completed his Master's and PhD in just 4 years and had 2 job offers—AT&T and the University of Pennsylvania. He had also applied to General Motors (GM) but they had said 'no'. As a policy, the company only hired candidates holding a green card. So it was quite a surprise to get a call from GM on a Monday morning.

> *Working at a research lab, you become master of something so narrow that other than a small community of people, nobody even knows there is work to be done there.*

"We might have an opening…. Are you still interested?"

On Tuesday, Pawan was on a plane to Detroit. A manager picked him up from the airport and the whole day was spent at the GM plant. There was no 'interview'. Pawan was asked to talk about his work, to a roomful of R & D guys. Then, he met some of those people for about half an hour each. The next morning Pawan received a formal offer—that's how fast things moved!

"I joined GM because the glamour was clearly in the auto industry. Secondly, my thesis work was more in line with what GM was looking for, that gave me a running start."

A proud father with his 'baby'—the Mahindra Scorpio

Pawan's first boss, Butch De Hart, was an old-timer who'd entered the company as a graduate engineer trainee. A colourful character, he was a hands-on guy. Butch introduced Pawan to the practical aspects of life—what doing R & D in the GM environment really meant. His second boss was a PhD and a Filipino. A lot of learnings from him, as well.

But the two biggest lessons for Pawan came from Neil Schilke, the guy who'd overruled HR and hired the Indian without a green card. A month after he joined, Pawan was invited to attend a meeting with some senior people. He reached one minute late. Neil simply said, "Pawan, the meeting has started, I will see you next time."

"I had to leave the room and after that I was *never ever* late for a meeting. That one lesson really stayed with me."

Another time, Pawan submitted an expense for $25, without a bill. The rule said a bill was necessary for $25 and up. When Neil pointed this out, Pawan said he would make it $24.99.

"You wrote $25, now you cannot change it," said Neil. "Get the bill."

So Pawan drove 40 miles to Detroit airport, took a bill from the restaurant where he'd eaten and got his reimbursement. A small but very important lesson, in terms of discipline and work culture.

The R & D team had many non-Americans, so GM provided one-on-one tutors to help improve their spoken English. This was of great help and boosted the new recruit's confidence.

Pawan quickly adjusted to this unfamiliar environment. Immersing himself in the GM way of life and his area of work, with single-minded focus.

"My 14 years at GM is summarised in one word called 'FLARE', a specialised software for designing engine components."

Pawan was responsible for everything, from planning the functionality to actual coding. He had a lot of exposure to computers at IIT Kanpur, which had acquired an IBM 1620 machine and taught students the basics of FORTRAN. However, at GM the software was coded with PLI (from IBM), a precursor to many programming languages which are in use today.

You might wonder, how can one work on a single piece of software for 14 years…. But that's what R & D is all about. You keep trying to improve the design by *this* much, by *this much more*.

There's a small community of people, across the world, working in the same area. They meet at conferences, compete with each other, but also compare notes.

"I enjoyed it thoroughly back then but if I had to do the same thing today, I would be utterly bored. Because in that kind of R & D, the pace is very slow!"

As luck would have it, in 1984, Pawan's boss was transferred to another division. So he became Manager (R & D), a good 10 years earlier than expected.

However, it was a gradual transition because he still spent 60-70% of his time doing R & D work. But he was responsible for the output of the entire group. There were 5–6 PhDs working with him, all very independent, almost his equals. As manager, you don't stand on their head, barking instructions. You give a direction, you set the pace.

"I think, perhaps my destiny was to be in management… so I didn't have a disliking for the work."

In GM, a PhD joins at level 7, rises to level 8 and usually retires there. But Pawan progressed to level 9 and in 1993, at age 39, he reached level 10. A couple of things worked in his favour. The work Pawan was doing had immediate, practical application. The FLARE software was being used by the GM power train division for the design of the mechanical components of an engine.

What's more, the FLARE software had been appreciated by the scientific community and won some awards. Though for Pawan, these were by-products. Of 'doing my job'.

"I came to the lab every day, I worked hard… but I didn't think I did anything extraordinary!"

Pawan's star was rising, in this most American of American companies. On the managerial side, there wasn't much diversity but in GM research, there was no feeling of American, non-American.

But from deep within, a longing for 'home' was awakening, in the man who had everything.

The film *Naam*, which released in 1986, had a ghazal by Pankaj Udhaas—*Chitthi Aayi Hai*. Whenever he heard that song, the left-brained, logically driven engineer, was reduced to tears.

Then, in July 1992, Pawan picked up the *India Abroad* newspaper on a Saturday morning and saw a full page appointment ad by Eicher Motors, urging NRIs to return home.

"Mamta suggested I should apply…. She was more keen to return to India; I was reluctant. But we thought, let us explore some options."

It was decided that Pawan would apply to a number of automobile companies on his next trip to India. On top of the list was Telco, Mahindra was just one of many, not a priority.

But a series of uncanny events followed. Whenever he visited India, Pawan's mother wanted him to spend as much time as possible, in Kolkata. One of the few cities Pawan could visit from Kolkata and return the same evening, was Mumbai. Which is why he scheduled an interview with Mahindra.

I am glad that I didn't sort of think too much about

it… or I would have decided not to come back and that would have been an opportunity lost for me and my family.

Pawan Goenka arrived in Mumbai in December 1992, a little after the Babri Masjid demolition. The city was at a standstill. The only person in office was Anand Mahindra himself. The nephew of Keshub Mahindra had taken over as Deputy Managing Director of the company, only a year earlier. The young Harvard Business School graduate wanted to put Mahindra on a new path.

What followed was not a standard interview, it was the owner sharing his vision of the future. Of Mahindra & Mahindra becoming a global automotive company.

In the end, Anand Mahindra simply said, "If you believe in the dream, if it challenges you… come and join the team."

There was no discussion about role, designation, who he would report to. Or how his career would progress. Yet Pawan Goenka signed on the dotted line.

"Anand's vision for R & D is what clinched the deal!"

Pawan went back to Detroit and tendered his resignation to Nick Gallopoulos. The initial reaction from his boss, was a stoic, "Okay… see you."

"That hurt my ego…. I thought he would be devastated!"

An hour later, Nick sent across a note saying, "Too stunned to react, didn't know what to say. Will speak to you tomorrow." While GM did accept his resignation, even in those last 9 months that he was with the company, Pawan got the promotion due to him. They also offered to treat the absence as unpaid leave, keeping the door open—should he change his mind—for the next 4 years.

Anand Mahindra said, "My only objective is that we should be able to compete with multinationals."

The family psyched itself to make the big move. Up until 3 months before leaving, there were still some doubts. Returning from a small holiday in New York, the plan was to go to Chicago to buy 220 volt appliances which would work in India. The road to Chicago lay straight ahead, going to Detroit meant exiting the freeway. It was a final 'turning point'.

Pawan asked Mamta once again, "If we go straight, we are moving back to India, if we turn right we are dropping our plans…. What do you want?"

She thought for a while, and said, "Let's go straight."

The one concern they still had was, are we being unfair to our children? While Pawan's son was only 5, his daughter was 8 and a little reluctant. So, he made a promise to her that 18 months from now, I'll ask you, whether you want to move back to US. If you say yes, no questions asked, we move back.

He also promised his wife, we will send both kids back to the US for their undergraduate degrees. And then, they are free to decide what they want to do with their lives.

The last and very difficult part was saying farewell to the close-knit group of 8–10 families that had become like their *parivaar* in the US. But the leap of faith had been taken. Pawan was leaving a job with the world's leading car company paying $120,000 CTC, to join a very small player based in India, at a salary of ₹7 lakh CTC.

“This decision of coming back to India was not a decision that was led by head, it was led by heart.… And I am glad we listened to our hearts, this one time.”

It was a rainy morning in October 1993, when Pawan landed in Mumbai. A company car was waiting to take him to the guesthouse. And on to Nasik, where the Mahindra R & D centre was located.

The location turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Had the family shifted to Mumbai, they would have lived in a small flat. In Nasik they had a bungalow with privacy, open space, just like America.

The family adjusted very well. In fact, 18 months later Pawan’s daughter, when asked, said, “You go back if you want to, I am staying here!”

It was Pawan who experienced a bigger culture shock, as a professional. Before accepting the offer he had not visited Nasik, he had not asked about his exact role or career progress.

“I am glad that I didn’t sort of think too much about it or I would have not come back at all…!”

Entering the R & D centre for the first time, he looked at the place and said, “Oh my gosh, is this it?”

The infrastructure, the workshop, the campus was primitive. R & D was housed in a small 2-storey building, a total of 50 people working in one shift. The 2 big achievements of Mahindra R & D had been modifying the Jeep from left-hand drive to right-hand drive. And adapting a tractor engine to the Jeep.

The easy option would have been to pack up and return to America. But *woh toh maidan chhod kar bhaagne wali baat hoti*…

At that time, Mahindra produced the Commandor 650 Jeep, the CJ340 Jeep, and the FJ Minibus. The company had just launched Armada, using the Chrysler Jeep chassis. With the interior, guts and body designed by a Japanese company. Altogether, Mahindra sold around 40,000 vehicles a year. But Anand could see the writing was on the wall.

Multinationals would soon enter India and the company would have two choices: become a contract manufacturer or kick their ass. Anand Mahindra was very clear in his mind —he wanted to be an independent Indian automotive company, with the strength to design, develop, manufacture and sell vehicles. Therefore, the brief to the new recruit was simple.

“Look, my only objective is that we should be able to compete with multinationals,” said Anand. “You do what you need to do. I give you full freedom.”

The trust and confidence placed by Anand Mahindra in his new recruit was unwavering. However, on the ground, it was not all smooth sailing. Pawan’s immediate boss and the head of R & D, Mr Parthasarathy, candidly said to the new recruit, “I don’t know why you have been hired.” The old-timers in the company could not fathom all this ‘new thinking’.

Here is an engineer who—for 14 years—has only designed engine components. How in the world will he design a car?!!

However, Parthasarathy gracefully supported Pawan and acquainted him with the nitty-gritties of working in India. Slowly but surely, the optimist in Pawan began to see a silver lining.

“Since we were at the very bottom of what engineering needs to be, for an automotive company, there was so much room to play, and that’s what made the job most exciting for me.”

The existing R & D team, though small, was very knowledgeable. And loyal to the company. Slowly, Pawan expanded it. Along with young engineers, he hired the first stylist. And brought in modern technology like CAD (Computer-Aided Design), CAE (Computer-Aided Engineering) and NVH (Noise, Vibration and Harshness) testing.

That time we didn't have a process, everything was trial and error. And when you don't have process, there is the advantage of experimenting and keeping things simple.

In 1995, Mr Pathasarathy retired and Pawan Goenka became head of R & D.

"Anand had in mind that if I prove worthy of it, then I would soon be taking his place. But I had no clue about this… when I joined."

The team led by Pawan Goenka took its first tentative steps into a new future. They gained confidence with small projects like chassis improvement, Mahindra Pickup. And then came the 'Bolero'.

By this time, the company had set up a die shop, in collaboration with Fuji from Japan. Anand Mahindra had taken a personal interest in the project.

"Let's do something which proves our die shop works," said Anand.

The brief to the R & D team was to make minimal changes and create a new vehicle in terms of looks. Pawan decided to work with the Mahindra Armada. The designers on the project were 2 young graduates from IIT Bombay's Industrial Design Centre, with no prior experience in automobile styling.

Keeping the Armada specs—a Peugeot 2.5 L (150 in3) IDI engine which produced 75 bhp (56 kW)—the designers worked their magic on the exteriors.

When Pawan shared the first-cut design with Anand Mahindra, he loved it.

"How much will it cost us to design, develop and produce this vehicle?" asked Anand.

Pawan Goenka had no clue—he hadn't done the math. But he didn't want the moment to slip away.

"25 crores," he replied.

And right then and there, the Bolero project was approved. No spreadsheet, no IRR calculations. Just an idea, an intention, an intensity of purpose.

So, I had a say in how we manufacture as well as decide the launch price and the marketing campaign. That helped me, an R & D person, to get a business view.

Soon after the Bolero was approved, Dr Goenka was asked to work on 'what next'.

A small team of engineers and designers was put together at the Kandivili plant. This was the genesis of the IDAM (Integrated Design and Manufacturing) centre, which would develop the Scorpio.

After intense brainstorming, the team came up with two options:

1) Follow the Bolero strategy, redesign an existing product.

2) Do something bigger, bolder, completely new ('this is what we recommend').

Both Alan Durante, then President of Mahindra Auto, and Anand Mahindra agreed with the team. The company should launch an entirely new vehicle, built from scratch. But what kind of vehicle?

"We thought it will be easier to target the rural market, where we already have a strong presence."

But then, the first clay impressions were made, and there was an 'aha' moment. The product was stylish, it had urban appeal. But, to succeed, Mahindra would have to think big.

Rural customers are not very fussy but the urban consumer wants *everything*. To build a vehicle which gives a smooth trouble-free ride, you need more attention to detail. This means more cost.

In fact, the investment required to pull off the project was estimated at ₹800 crores. Which was a hell of a lot of money!

When Anand Mahindra presented the proposal, the Board flatly said 'No'.

"We have never done anything like this before, we don't know whether it will succeed or not," was the logic. Because if it failed, the company was doomed.[1]

But Anand Mahindra would not give up easily. He asked the Board, "How much can we spend?"

The Board replied, "If you can cut it down to ₹600 crores, we can think about it."

When Pawan Goenka and team heard the figure, their first reaction was—impossible. But the choice was ₹600 crores or nothing. So they went back to the drawing board and a month later, Anand Mahindra was informed—"Can do!" The 'Scorpio' project was approved and now, it was all systems go! The project would take 4 years, and ₹550 crores, from start to finish.

Broadly, the money was spent in 4 buckets. Firstly, manpower—about 150 engineers working day and night. The second major cost was prototyping and testing the vehicles. 75 such vehicles were built and tested (then junked). The third part of the money went in tooling—at the Mahindra plant, as well as what suppliers would use.

And the fourth major investment was in the plant—the weld shop, paint shop, assembly line. Back in 1995—before the Scorpio was even conceived—Mahindra had a joint venture with the Ford Motor Co. The complete knockdown kit was imported and assembled in Nasik. In fact, Ford had set up a modern paint shop for this very purpose.

"The same paint shop we used for Scorpio. So, that Ford joint venture helped us to get the basics of manufacturing in place."

Another trend at the time was the entry of multinational suppliers, such as Lear (makers of seats) or Vistion (for plastic parts and instrument panels). Their clients were the global car companies who were setting up shop in India. But, they had grossly overestimated the market. And hence had a whole lot of spare capacity.

It was Dr C K Prahalad who pointed out the opportunity when Bharat Doshi and Pawan Goenka visited his home in Ann Arbor, for an informal chat.[2]

CKP said, "These companies are hungry for business. Don't spend money… show them the carrot!" So when Mahindra Auto approached Lear to work with the Scorpio, it set some tough conditions. Although taken aback at first, they agreed to engineer the product (for free). In fact, Lear *paid* Mahindra a fee to become their sole supplier for seating.

"We didn't have any legacy or any deep knowledge about those components, so we were more willing to accept what they suggested. That worked very well for us."

In fact, it was hailed as a new idea in the industry. A popular auto magazine in Detroit ran a cover story with the title 'Mahindra Scorpio, designed by suppliers'. Which was a hit with all concerned.

The Scorpio team also looked beyond the US and Japan to source out new suppliers. Korean companies, in particular, proved to be very cost effective.

What Mahindra focused on was 2 things: the body and interiors (designed by Shyam Allepalli and Kripa Ananthan[3]) and the NEF engine, which became one of the strengths of the Scorpio.

"It was a challenge but I had the good fortune of being able to pick the best people we had in the company, to work on the project, because it was the *most* important project for the company."

There was a lot of anxiety, we didn't know what will happen. Whether we will succeed, not succeed, and the Board also was very anxious because they had sanctioned so much money…

Winston D'Souza, who was the head of the Nasik plant, came in as the Manufacturing head while Bhaumik led the Engineering. Vijay Nakra, a young graduate engineer trainee, was brought in for Sales & Marketing. Hemant Sikka and Nitin Tikle were recruited to lead Sourcing. From each of his colleagues, Pawan picked up valuable lessons in business.

From a pure R & D man, Pawan Goenka was evolving into an all-rounder.

The IDAM centre in Kandivili was literally a 'company within the company'. 19 cross-functional sub-teams sat together and could simply walk across and speak to each other. Everyone, from top to bottom, came to work in a common IDAM uniform. And for a common purpose.

"It was the first time we had this concept of the complete project team working in one place."

Of course, there was a whole lot of coordination to be done with every other division in the company. For example, the Scorpio would be manufactured in Nasik, at the existing plant. But the project team set up a whole new assembly line, weld shop and press shop. And took full responsibility for it, right up to the launch.

A start-up within a large enterprise is a wonderful concept. But often gets derailed by interpersonal rivalry. One of Pawan's big challenges was managing his peers. The head of Manufacturing, head of Sales & Marketing, head of Purchase—all reported to Alan Durante. Naturally, there was some unease about 'why is *he* doing everything'.

It's important to maintain some level of humility. Because if you let success go to your head, you will stop growing… or you grow but nobody likes you. Neither is desirable.

To tackle this, Alan Durante formed a steering committee comprising heads of all functions. The committee met once a month and in this way, everyone felt a sense of ownership, involvement. This was a master stroke.

"I don't remember any major problem. If I thought I had stepped on someone's toes, I quickly said sorry and moved on."

In the year 2000, while Scorpio was still in progress, the Bolero was launched. It was far more successful than anyone imagined, selling 1,000–1,500 units a month. This boosted the confidence of the Scorpio team. Bolero was also the first product for which the company ran a well-crafted ad campaign. A film was made, showing a man jogging, with his wife following him, driving a Bolero.

It was important to design and manufacture a great vehicle, but equally important to *market* it.

This responsibility rested on the young shoulders of Rajesh Jejurikar, an MBA from SP Jain who had previously worked with Voltas, FCB Ulka and Marico. A recent recruit, he had shown his marketing mettle with the Bolero campaign. Now the stakes were higher, the canvas bigger. Yet, going by his gut, Rajesh took some bold decisions.

"Firstly, we decided not to call the vehicle an SUV. Because there was no SUV market

at that time. We called it a car. So many car buyers started looking at the Scorpio!"

Second, the car was called Scorpio by Mahindra (with 'Mahindra' in small lettering). Because Mahindra was a fuddy-duddy tractor and rural UV company, not a brand name you could use to attract the urban buyer. The most crucial decision was the pricing of ₹6 lakh, just about break-even. This made Scorpio more attractive than the competition (Toyota Qualis and Tata Safari).

So here was a vehicle which made a strong style statement, had a powerful engine (the first to cross 100 horsepower in India) and great pricing. People started looking at this product, liking it.

"I feel there was one more factor that worked for Scorpio. Which was a pride amongst Indians, that an Indian company has done this…."

Even though the vehicle was not trouble-free. The Scorpio had a lot of engineering issues, initially, but the customers gave the product a bit of a long rope.

And somehow, like a jigsaw puzzle, every element fell in place. And the Scorpio became a 'success story'.

"In some sense it's a miracle. Because when we started we had no people, no process, no knowledge, no money, and we really didn't know what we were doing…!"

When you have purpose, means follow. Help comes from unexpected places.

Early on, the Chairman of the Ford Motor Co., Jacques Nasser, invited the team to London to make a presentation to the senior management. They were impressed but also convinced that 'these chaps will fail'. Yet, at the end of the meeting, Mr Nasser offered to send 3 of his engineers to work on the Scorpio, free of cost.

"I am just so intrigued with what you are trying to do, at such a low cost, that we would want you to succeed," he said.

Someone in the room suggested that Ford should also provide 'program management support'. Jacques said 'No'.

"The moment you bring in Ford program management, they'll work like Ford. Let them work the way they want to, we'll just give them a little engineering support."

Ford engineers worked with the Scorpio team for about 6 months. Later, 6 Mahindra engineers spent 6 months at Dearborn, Michigan, to understand Ford's quality systems and processes.

This helped create what is today known as the 'Mahindra Quality System'.

The joint venture between Ford and Mahindra, inked in 1994, is considered a 'failure' by many.[4]

"But if we go beyond commercials, both companies learnt a lot from each other."

And yet, there can be no bigger teacher, than life itself. Between 1998 and 2003, when the Scorpio was being developed, Pawan's wife Mamta was diagnosed with breast cancer. At such a time, it would be natural to demand more time, more attention, from her husband. But Mamta was made of tougher stuff. She knew how crucial the Scorpio project was…

A chance for Pawan to show the stuff he was made of.

"Focus on your work, I can take care of myself," she said to her husband.

Through painful surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, Mamta remained positive. Neither Pawan nor the kids saw her moaning and groaning, in pain or distress.

> *I don't believe in or use too many buzzwords, and when I make any speech, what I hear as a compliment is that your speech was beautifully simple.*

“It is not that I was in denial but sharing my pain would make my family miserable… what would be the point? It was my battle, that I had to fight.”

With extraordinary willpower and resilience, Mamta won her battle with cancer, while Pawan was able to work fervently and diligently. And ‘give birth’ to the car we know as Scorpio.

By the end of the first year, the Scorpio had sold a scorching 11,798 units. The company raised the price—the car continued to be in demand. Dealers competed to sell the Scorpio—they had to completely refurbish their showroom to ‘earn this right’. And felt proud, when selected.

With the extended family, a bond unbreakable

The Board was finally satisfied, as well. Of the ₹600 crores allotted to the project, only ₹550 crores was actually spent. It was a big bet, a risky bet, but it had finally paid off.

“I think what it did also was to give us confidence to move on with bigger and better things.”

Bigger things were also in store for Pawan Goenka. In 2003, Pawan was appointed Chief Operating Officer for the auto business. Shortly after this, Anand Mahindra sent him to Harvard for the 9-week Advanced Management Program (AMP). With Alan Durante due to retire in 2 years’ time, the R & D man was being groomed to take over as CEO.

The time spent at Harvard was a tremendous learning experience. Moving from engineering to general management is unusual in itself. In addition, Pawan would have full responsibility for the largest business of the Mahindra Group. Many challenges lay ahead: What do I do? How do I do it? Where should this business go?

The brief but formal training in marketing, finance and every other aspect of business

was extremely useful.

"I used to think that MBA is over-rated, but I don't think so anymore. Engineering thinking is very left-brain, MBA thinking is a combination of left and right-brain."

Because you will have all kinds of data, but how you use that data to make decisions is what matters. And this requires not just logic but some intuition. Pawan was also able to spend time with some of his professors one-on-one to bounce off thoughts and ideas, get their feedback. So, when he returned, he was able to implement some of those things immediately.

The next 2 years spent as COO were exciting, with the industry in a growth phase.

One event in this period clearly stands out in Pawan's memory. Because it had a significant emotional impact, which led to introspection—and internal changes.

Each year, the JD Power Survey ranks auto companies on various parameters, including Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) and Sales Service Index (SSI). In an annual internal conference, Anand Mahindra showed data on how poorly the auto division was doing on both CSI and SSI. In fact, Mahindra ranked 14 out of the 14 companies listed.

That was such an embarrassing moment for Pawan, that he came out of the conference, went home and drafted a very emotional mail to all employees of Mahindra Auto.

"And that's when we vowed that we are going to totally change and put our focus on the customer. Do everything we can to make the customer satisfied, happy."

An ambitious, long-term project which would take more than a decade, to show results.[5]

Results are what every CEO is judged on. But how does one achieve them?

As Alan Durante handed over the baton, he shared a valuable piece of advice: 'Be true to yourself'. And this has been Pawan's signature style as CEO.

"What has worked for me is… I am what I am… and I don't pretend to be what I am not. I never put a facade of any kind.

Therefore people tend to trust me."

And the real test of trust comes in times of crisis, in adversity.

In 2009, Mahindra Auto launched the Xylo. The car was received poorly, sales were weak. After the success of Bolero and Scorpio, this was a rude jolt to the company.

What's more, in the fourth quarter of 2009, Mahindra Auto posted a loss.

But in this dark cloud, there must be a silver lining. This was a lesson Pawan Goenka learnt from Mamta. Through her ordeal, Mamta had emerged stronger, with renewed purpose (see box).

That is what we need to do… at Mahindra Auto.

So it was, that in the midst of economic slowdown, Pawan Goenka took a big and bold proposal to the Board. To invest ₹5,000 crores in a state-of-the-art, ultra-modern automotive plant. Bigger than Nasik, bigger than Kandivili, a plant that would make Mahindra future-proof and future-ready. To meet demand 10… 20… .30 years from now.

"It was a very difficult decision… and a very large sum of money for the company to commit. In fact more difficult than investing ₹550 crores in Scorpio in '96-'97.

But the Board was convinced—'this is the path to growth'—and bit the bullet. A piece of land was identified and acquired at Chakan, near Pune.

Setting up a modern automotive plant from ground up is a mammoth task. People come and go but a manufacturing plant will have a lifespan of 50–100 years. So one has to 'see' into the future.

> *You can work more and still feel good about work-life balance or work less and yet feel bad about work-life balance. It's really how you condition*

your mind.

Dr Goenka was intimately involved in every aspect of planning in the initial phase of the project.

"I sometimes joke that I know every brick that has gone into Chakan Phase 1!"

The plant, with a capacity of 100,000 vehicles, was set up in 2 years—from start to finish. Visitors are astounded: standing inside, you might think you are in Germany, or Japan. Except that the 4,000-odd workers are Marathi-speaking local lads. And the plant produces everything from half ton load carriers to XUV 500s to 49 ton trucks.

The very first car to roll out of the Chakan plant in September 2011 was the XUV 500. But the process of developing the XUV was very different from the early, start-up phase of the company.

With Bolero, it was pure gut-feel, with Scorpio, a few Excel spreadsheets. But now, there is a process. Starting with market research, done right.

The 'voice of customers' is put onto Post-It notes and stuck on a wall. The designers try to spot a pattern and then synthesise them into an image.

Production estimates how much investment it will take and a 'business case' is made.

"My expertise is in R & D and product development issues but perhaps because of Marwari blood, I also understand numbers very well!"

Unlike the Scorpio which was born in a small shed, the XUV 500 was prototyped in a hi-tech lab at the Mahindra Research Valley in Chennai. The wheel had, indeed, come full circle.

The XUV was a 'big leap'—in ambition and imagination. And it paid off handsomely, selling more than 50,000 units in the first year alone. Scripting another success story.

In April 2010, Pawan Goenka was given the responsibility for Mahindra's Farm Equipment business. When he shared the news at home, his 22-year-old son's reaction was, "Tractors??!!"

Certainly not as sexy as cars. But as Pawan rolled up his sleeves and took a hard look at the business, he began to get excited.

"In the automotive business you carry a bit of guilt, that you are polluting the environment, leading to congestion… but with tractors everything you do is really positive!"

The first thing Pawan Goenka did was 'move' to the tractor side of the Kandivili plant. This was to convey that the business was as important as auto. And that he was willing to learn.

Under Dr Goenka's watch, Mahindra launched new, technologically superior tractor lines such as the Novo, Yuvo and Jivo. And became a force to reckon with in the US market.[6]

Consider for a moment just one fact: Mahindra sells more tractors (by volume) than any other company in the world.

However, tractors are just one part of the farm ecosystem, the ambition is much bigger. Agribusiness presented a new and exciting growth opportunity. Dr Goenka and his team thus set up a separate vertical—Mahindra Shubh Laabh—which includes micro-irrigation, crop care, fresh produce, seeds and greenhouses.

"To deliver farm prosperity is at the core of our philosophy, Mahindra RISE."

Over the last decade, the quest for globalisation gathered momentum with a series of acquisitions including Pininfarina (an Italian design house), Erkunt Traktor Sanayii AS (Turkish tractor maker) and SsangYong Motor Company in South Korea (whose compact SUV Tivoli will soon be launched in India).

In November 2017, Mahindra set up a manufacturing facility for off-road vehicles in the world's car capital—Detroit. A moment of pride, a moment of triumph.

The company Pawan Goenka joined in 1993, is very different from the company he heads today. The numbers speak for themselves.

In the year ending 31 March 2018, Mahindra and Mahindra (passenger vehicles) and Mahindra Vehicle Manufacturing Limited (other vehicles) clocked gross revenues of ₹48,529 crores and profit after tax of ₹4,623 crores. While overall global sales crossed 1 million units, including SUVs, tractors and commercial vehicles (buses, vans, trucks).

Incidentally, the Bolero is still the highest selling Mahindra passenger vehicle. Recently crossing the milestone of 1 million units! New styling and a new engine has revived its fortunes.

"From pure return on investment, Bolero has been our most successful product ever."

With an eye on the future, Mahindra bought home-grown electric car company Reva. The company is investing ₹600 crores in a new plant which will soon roll out electric buses and 3-wheelers.

Because *kal kisne dekha hai*… it all makes sense only when you look back and connect those dots.

Looking back at his career, Pawan feels he's always been driven by purpose. In the early years, it was about rising above his modest background. To 'prove myself'. Whether at IIT or at Cornell, or at General Motors, Pawan Goenka was the guy starting out a little bit behind. But quickly adapting, evolving, emerging a leader in the pack.

After returning to India, a new and 'higher purpose' emerged. To prove that Indians in India can design, develop, manufacture and sell vehicles that can compete with the best in the world.

"If you were to go back to '93 and look at today… it's amazing how far we have come! I take tremendous pride in the fact that I had a small role to play in that."

> *Success means not 'I am great', it just means, 'I am okay and God has been kind'.*

And this role goes beyond Mahindra. Pawan has been a leading voice in SIAM (Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers) and CII (Confederation of Indian Industry).

Given all that is on his plate, the hours are long, yet don't feel stressful. A typical day starts with reaching the office at 9 am, with back-to-back meetings up to 7 pm. On the ride back, Pawan checks his email. It's an old habit to reply to each one, even if it's a 2-word response. The good part is, people appreciate it. The bad part is, it takes time.

Hence continues, even at home, after dinner. But it's with everyone around, chit-chatting in between, with an eye on the news (or KBC or cricket).

"Overall, that's my personality—being available to people. Anybody can write about anything to me, without having to worry about a negative reaction."

It's also the company DNA. Right from Anand Mahindra, all senior managers receive customer emails and respond to them directly, not through some assistant.

In the midst of it all, the one pastime Pawan indulges in, is playing online Scrabble with Mamta.

With one working Saturday, various commitments to industry bodies and work-related travel, time is always a rare and precious commodity.

"I am basically a family man outside the office, meaning that I don't do too many other things. Because there is no way one can do other things and do justice to the family!"

No outings with the boys, watching sports, or TV series. The gym is a twice-a-week ritual. Sundays are sacred and spent watching a Bollywood movie, or a play, or dinner with

family. Week-long holidays every year with the family, one in India and one abroad. And it all works because of a ‘superglue’, which is his wife Mamta. Who takes care of *everything* outside the office.

Whether it is a pilgrimage to Tirupati with Pitaji, a death in the family, or even her own surgery, Mamta is the one who takes complete charge.

“I have never been to the bank in India. Never been to my kids’ school….” admits Pawan.

They say behind every successful man there is a woman. Here is clear evidence of it!

What Pawan really values is that Mamta is not demanding of his time. In fact, she is the one who encourages him to take on more. When an opportunity arises where he has a choice, say there is an invitation to become President of a professional body, her response is ‘go for it’. At the same time, she also keeps Pawan grounded.

“See, every once in a while, a person could get a superiority complex that hey, I am doing so well, so on and so forth. At such times she will have a sobering effect on me!”

And the other thing that keeps Pawan grounded is ‘where he came from’. A modest family, which has done well through hard work, dedication and education. Two of his brothers are CAs, the third is a well-known doctor in Kolkata. Nobody has expensive tastes. And, these values have been imbibed by the next generation, as well.

Both daughter Pooja and son Puneet completed their undergraduate degrees from the University of Michigan (a promise Pawan had made to the family, when he took the decision to shift to India).

Pooja went on to do her Master’s at TISS, Mumbai, and is now a freelance HR consultant. Puneet has worked with various organisations, including Naandi Foundation.

“My son had the luxury of experimenting for 4–5 years, I didn’t have that luxury. But I think it’s good that he took that time to understand what he really wants to do in life.”

Which is to work for, or create a social enterprise. After an MBA from the Stephen M Ross School of Business, Puneet returned to Mumbai to work with a consulting firm, developing sustainable education for low-income schools. Pooja and Puneet also run an NGO called ‘Our Bit’, which works with underprivileged children.

And in some mysterious way, life is a circle which brings you back. Right where you started. When they moved back to India, Puneet was 5 years old. One day, he came home with a question.

“Why are all these people sleeping on the street? We have 2 empty bedrooms, why can’t they sleep with us?”

And the work which Pawan did at General Motors—which was so super-specialised, and seems so far away today—that too, lives on…

“From one of our suppliers, I came to know that the work I had done in my PhD—39 years ago—is not yet obsolete!”

Changing gears, changing lanes, but never losing your bearings.

Recently, Pawan returned to Harpalpur after more than 5 decades. His family has adopted the primary school where he (and his brothers) spent their primary school years.

“Our ancestors opened their godowns for the poor and the hungry… today, there is hunger for education.”

And somewhere, there is a little boy or girl roaming through the gullies and bazaars of the city. Wanting to rise above their circumstances.

Who knows how far that mind will go… who knows which way the winds will blow!

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[1] In 1998, the annual turnover of Mahindra was ₹4,000 crores, with profit after tax

approximately ₹400 crores.

[2] Dr Goenka considers Bharat Doshi as his chief mentor at Mahindra.

[3] Kripa Ananthan is now the head of Design at Mahindra Auto.

[4] In 2005, Mahindra tried a joint venture with Renault. But the Logan car which came out of it failed to meet targets. The JV was dissolved in 2010.

[5] In the JD Power Survey 2017, Mahindra ranked highest in dealer satisfaction in the commercial vehicle category and Sales Satisfaction Index (mass market).

[6] 2016–17 sales of tractors in the US was $547 million. The aim is to take that to $1 billion by 2020.

Mujhe bahuton ne raah dikhayi,
ab hai meri baari aayi…
Kisi aur ka aagey badhna,
uska likhna, uska padhna.
Maine apna farz nibhaya,
usme adbhut ras hai paaya
Zindagi ki balance sheet,
aise hoti hai complete.

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

There has to be a purpose to your life.

When I say purpose to your life, it's not about getting promoted next year to vice president and year after to senior vice president or to get a 20% increment.

Purpose is 'what am I here for', 'what am I trying to achieve'.

I am not expecting that a 24-year-old will have complete clarity on this, but some idea. Not where you want to be 20 years from now but *what you want to be known as*.

My advice is: Imagine you are writing a book on yourself and put down the table of contents. Go back to that book every 4–5 years and ask yourself. Is this still valid, or do I need to change something?

The other important thing in my opinion is to always remain humble, both as a leader and as a business. The moment arrogance sets in, the business will stop performing well.

I also believe that, everyone who comes to office in the morning wants to do a good day's work. Therefore we need to believe in people a little longer than what the current corporate culture is. Let us not be too quick to say 'this person cannot deliver'. But try and bring the best out of a person.

A lot of effort is required to do that. You have to be patient, but, I think that's what connects the people to the company.

I was not born to be a CEO—I knew nothing about Finance, Marketing, Manufacturing, Purchase, Sales, or HR. So what I have managed to do is learn from people around me, from mentors.

The CEO's job is not to create stars, nor to become a star, but to take an ordinary team and achieve extraordinary results. And that will happen, if the CEO does not act as if he knows it all.

BLESSING IN DISGUISE

How Mamta Goenka fought cancer thrice and emerged stronger for it.

The first time Mamta Goenka was admitted to Tata Memorial Hospital for breast cancer surgery, a doctor came into her room in the evening, and asked, “Who is with you?”

She replied, “No one… what’s the matter?”

The doctor said, “There are some papers which need to be xeroxed.”

Mamta got out of the hospital bed, changed into her normal clothes, went out and xeroxed the papers. It was no big deal. And where was her husband?

“At home, with our kids,” she says. “They were small—they needed him more!”

That’s Mamta Goenka for you. When she was first diagnosed with breast cancer in

March 1998, it did come as a shock. Just 6 months earlier, her sister had been diagnosed with the very same disease. “Yes, it is the ‘C’ word and it is happening to me,” whispered a voice within.

But somehow it didn’t feel like the end of the world.

The girl who grew up in an orthodox Marwari family and fought to complete her higher studies, then fought to marry a ‘self-made’ man, simply decided, ‘I will fight this too’.

She made her kids sit down and explained to them, “Yes, this is cancer but your mother is not going anywhere… I am going to see you guys grow up, that’s a promise.”

While Mamta kept her promise and made a full recovery, her sister succumbed.

On the day of her funeral, Mamta felt another lump—this time, in her left breast. She fought back again, underwent surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. And won this battle too.

By 2003, she was officially a 2-time cancer survivor. But this, was just the beginning of the story…

During the dark days, when she waited for her turn at Tata Memorial Hospital, Mamta would chat with her fellow patients. They were poor, uneducated, clueless…

“When I recover, I will ‘do something’ for them…!” she thought.

Mamta would spend a good amount of time in the OPD and doctors noticed her, standing in a corner and just absorbing things. Slowly, they started directing patients to her, especially those who were finding it difficult to cope. And slowly that’s how Mamta became a ‘counsellor’ of sorts.

“Word spread, patients contacted me… I became the best cancer agony aunt within my immediate and my much extended network.”

Then, Mamta started conducting formal post-operative care sessions at the hospital, 3 times a week, with the help of volunteers.

Her message is simple: “No moaning and groaning—this is a new beginning! All you need to do is, put on your boxing gloves.”

Mamta chanced upon the idea of a ‘cancer care kit’ at a conference. She Indianised the concept, made a prototype, got approval from doctors to start distributing it. But where would the funding come from? She wrote to Anand Mahindra, who liked the idea and pledged his support. (“Pawan had no role to play in this.”)

While her husband and kids gave updates on what happened at school and at work, Mamta shared patient updates.

“Cancer was a word we avoided during my treatment at home… now it became a frequent topic of conversation at our dinner table!”

Mamta had also experienced a painful post-surgery condition called lymphedema. She went to the US and learnt how to manage it. She began sharing this knowledge, as well.

“It is my living room at home which serves as an informal clinic,” she laughs. Her efforts have helped to set up 25 lymphedema centres within hospitals across 20 cities in India.

20 years and 14 surgeries later, Mamta says cancer has been a ‘blessing’.

“We all have cancers… situations that overtake our lives and come in our way. My cancer just happened to manifest itself as a physical disease.”

It opened the doors for her to work in a hospital (a childhood dream). Empowered her to empower others. And to show, by example, that 90% of any battle is fought in one’s mind. In fact, Mamta has just completed what she calls her ‘third journey’ with breast cancer.

“This is all my new hair coming in… for the third time,” she smiles.

MANU JAIN

Xiaomi

Manu Jain is the rare guy who went from co-founder of a hot start-up to working for someone else. What matters is *who* you work for, which in this case is Lei Jun, the visionary behind Xiaomi. Mi phones debuted in India on Flipkart in July 2014 with 10,000 pieces for sale. Today it's the number 1 smartphone brand in the country. How did they do it? By thinking big, and thinking different!

EYE OF THE TIGER

When I was in college, I used a shampoo called Halo, which was yellow and claimed to have the goodness of eggs.

25 years later, I use another brand of shampoo, which is white and claims to have the goodness of aloe vera.

Both shampoos essentially do the same thing—they clean my hair. The name and shape of the bottle is different, but *waise kuch badla nahin*.

And then I think of the phone I used back then—a bulky black instrument with rotary dial—and compare it with the device I have now, which fits in the palm of my hand.

There's the real world, where the pace of change is often hardly visible. Then there's the digital world: you go to sleep at night and wake up to find *something* has changed.

Manu Jain's career reflects this magnitude of change.

First, he walked away from investment banking, despite the money. Then, he walked away from McKinsey to co-found a start-up. And then, he took a complete U-turn.

From a 'hot and happening entrepreneur', he decided to become an 'employee'.

What's important is who he chose to work for—an entrepreneur with mission and vision. Who gave him the freedom to think big, act fast and build a business from scratch.

In a manner that had not been done before.

In less than 4 years, Xiaomi has become the number 1 selling smartphone in India, shipping 10 million units a quarter. Without TV or hoardings or celebrity endorsements.

That's the hunger of a brand, which is a tiger on the prowl. Fierce, majestic, inspired.

Manu Jain was born in the sleepy town of Meerut (Uttar Pradesh), and grew up in a joint family.

"Actually it was a super-joint family. My great-grandfather had a large business in British times and he had 11 sons…"

The ancestral property was divided up among the brothers, they lived in different houses, but a stone's throw from each other. The *hum saath saath hain* feeling remained.

"Everyone in the locality was a second or third cousin… we even had a family temple!"

When Manu was in Class 4, his teacher asked him how many brothers and sisters he had.

The lad started counting and finally declared, "45."

The teacher was shocked. *Aisa kaise ho sakta hai?* Manu stood his ground. He didn't know the difference between 'real' siblings and cousins. So close were the bonds!

All the cousins attended the same school—Dayawati Modi Academy—and it was assumed that the boys would eventually join the family business. Which was run by various uncles, with some cross-holding, mostly in manufacturing. Like copper, steel, watch components, a car repair workshop.

"If you did a BCom or BSc, that was considered good enough. Nobody aspired for more."

In Class 12, Manu's father asked him, "*Aagey kya karna chahte ho*." It came as a surprise when he declared, "I want to do engineering." Manu appeared for the UP state entrance exam and got a computer science seat in a government college. Which was pretty phenomenal, as he hadn't studied for it, even for a day.

"I had always been a mediocre student, with 70–80% marks. But I got a better seat than the toppers in my school… which felt great!"

Then, he went for the counselling, and now everyone he met was asking, "Did you apply for IIT? What was your JEE rank?"

That's when Manu realised there is something called 'IIT', which is significantly better than a government college in UP. And that's when he took the first bold decision of his life.

"I want to take a drop and appear for the IIT entrance exam."

Manu's dad was furious. *Ek toh* he had already submitted the first semester fees (which was a pretty big amount for a small businessman in those days). But more than that, he wasn't quite convinced this made any sense. You got lucky this year, what is the guarantee *ki agley saal* you will get the same seat?

Somehow, Manu convinced his dad. What followed was the toughest year of his life. The family didn't have the means to send him to Kota, and there weren't any formal test prep classes in Meerut. So Manu studied under local teachers, with the help of some good books. He managed to crack JEE and got into IIT Delhi, mechanical engineering batch.

> *All my banking friends probably make a lot more money than I do, but that's not a job I can ever enjoy. I want to make a real impact with my work!*

“1999–2003… half the things I have learnt in life were during those four years. My personality changed, completely!”

Coming from a small town, Manu was very shy, had very little exposure. IIT was a whole new world. In first year, there were inter-hostel competitions and Manu became part of the Dramatics Club. Practice sessions started post dinner and went on till 3 or 4 am. Then there were classes to attend, starting at 8 am.

“Basically, I learnt time management and how to work in a team… and made some of my closest friends!”

In third year, Manu was part of a 4-member team that organised a tech fest on behalf of SAE (Society of Automotive Engineers). This included pitching to sponsors, inviting students from other colleges, arranging for their stay. And getting work out of a bunch of volunteers—a practical lesson in leadership!

On the academic front, Manu was exposed to a host of new subjects: deep concepts in physics, mathematics and engineering. And in the first year, it was all quite daunting.

“So many courses when I thought, maybe I will flunk!”

The self-doubt was heightened by the presence of ‘topper types’. But eventually, Manu realised, no subject is *that* hard. Even though he’d never done coding, he scored well in the computer science course. And that’s when it hit him—“*I can do anything*.” The biggest takeaway from IIT was belief in oneself.

As luck would have it, Manu graduated in 2003, a really bad year right after the dotcom bust. For the first time in the history of IIT Delhi, there were a few in the batch who did not get placed. Manu applied to 10–12 companies, and in each case, he would get to the very last round and then get rejected. He never knew exactly *what* was going wrong…

Then came a company called Techspan, started by Arjun Malhotra (one of the co-founders of HCL). They were looking to hire ‘really smart people’ who could develop high-end sophisticated software for investment banks. It was the second- or third-highest paying gig on campus that year.

Though he wasn’t that great at coding, Manu applied for the job and got shortlisted. During the interview, he decided to be completely honest.

“I have no idea about software programming, but I am really good at Maths. Ask me any problem in Maths and I can solve it.”

The interviewer was the CTO of the company. He gave Manu 5–6 different mathematical puzzles to solve. True to his word, *ek ek ka answer sahi nikla*.

The final round was with one of the co-founders. The interview revolved around just one topic, which had nothing to do with tech.

“I was hugely fascinated by Dhirubhai Ambani and we just spoke about that.”

Manu was one of the 10 freshers hired from across different IITs. And the only one who was not a computer science graduate! The next 2 years were great fun, working out of an office on Brigade Road. *The* place to be in Bangalore back then. A young crowd which worked together, partied together—it was like an extension of college life.

But Manu knew this was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. They were building software solutions for a client in the US whom they never saw, never met.

“I could not see the impact of my work… it was like being shut in a black box.”

So Manu did what any frustrated engineer would do—he wrote the CAT exam. And got calls from 5 of the 6 IIMs. Unlike most engineers (or anyone for that matter), Manu decided to conduct a ‘social experiment’. In 3 of the 5 interviews, he wore a kurta pyjama, for the rest he wore a formal suit.

He wanted to see if that would make any difference in the outcome. *Well?* I look at him expectantly—*kya hua*?

“Nothing, no co-relation. All 3 interviews where I went in kurta pyjama—they selected

me. But it was a good conversation starter!"

Manu joined IIM Calcutta, which was another interesting experience. And also where he met his wife, Minu. And, well, roll numbers played an important role in this love story. Hers was 228, his was 225. So they sat in many classes with one Mr 226 between them (227 had conveniently dropped out).

"But for the first 2 semesters we never spoke to each other, or even said hi to each other…"

> *Every project at McKinsey required a different skillset. That gave me a lot of confidence in terms of solving real-life problems.*

Now most classes in IIM require folks to work together in groups. In the third semester, there was a professor who appreciated diversity in the formation of groups. This meant reaching out to rare species such as non-engineers. And girls. Manu reached out to roll number 225. She accepted the offer. And that's how they started talking to each other.

Then came summer placement, where Manu just about cracked it. He was one of 2 students who were shortlisted by 12 companies in 'Slot 0' (the most prestigious of the lot).

Everybody said, "Oh, you'll definitely get through, *tere ko to chinta karne ki zaroorat hi nahi*."

Ab Manhattan door nahi, thought Manu, but he was jolted back to reality. From stud to dud with a thud—he could not convert a single interview! It was humiliating!

Thankfully, in Slot 0.5, Manu was selected by Tata Administrative Services (TAS). Which was also a great job, based in Mumbai. On the very first day that he landed in the city, our man was feeling bored and called a few friends to join him for dinner. No one was free. So he reached out to his study group partner—roll number 225.

"Hey, are you in Bombay?" he asked her.

"Yes," came the reply.

"If you are somewhere close by, why don't you come over, we'll have dinner at the Taj."

One of the perks of working with TAS! So, here was a guy in need of company, and there was a girl, tired of eating hostel food. A date, engineered by fate… and over the next 2 months, Manu and Minu met often, got to know each other. At the end of it, they were the best of friends.

Back on campus, in the fourth semester, they did every course together. In 7 out of 8 subjects, Manu and Minu formed a group for project work. Just the two of them. They spent the entire day together, studied together, motivated each other. At the end of the semester, their CGPA had gone through the roof.

"Oh, they are going steady," everyone thought.

They shook their heads. Yes, we are inseparable but…

"The entire time we were on campus, we never thought we were anything more than best buddies."

Manu went to Paris (ESCP EAP) for an exchange program. When he returned, the campus was buzzing with placement fever. More than 300 companies were expected that year.

"When I applied to just 3 companies—all consulting—people thought I was crazy! But I had a pre-placement offer from TAS, so what did I have to lose?"

Arey, but investment banking is hot—*try to kar*, they said. Manu did not give in to peer

pressure. *Dimaag clear tha*: “I-banking is not the job for me.” No matter how well it pays.

Knowing what you *don’t* want is a first step. In the direction of your true north.

Well, as it happened, both BCG and McKinsey made offers, and Manu chose BCG. But before he could join, McKinsey called and said, “We’d like to meet you.”

At that meeting, the charismatic Ireena Vittal[1] convinced the young man that he should, in fact, join their firm. So it was that Manu Jain found himself at McKinsey, where he spent 5 exciting years. Working on diverse projects, in diverse sectors, in diverse geographies. From India to Southeast Asia to Africa.

One of the memorable projects was in Zambia, working with the world’s biggest copper mine, to increase throughput.

So, how would a chap in his mid-20s, with no mining experience, be able to do that?

“Every project I worked on, we would go into the field, understand what the problem was, and then find ways to solve it.”

The problem in the copper mine was that there was more than enough ore, but not enough equipment to bring it up. The obvious solution was: ‘get more dumper trucks’. But these aren’t ordinary trucks, they are custom built. The minimum procurement time was 6 months. So, they decided to buy second-hand dumpers.

But then, a new problem arose. Enough ore was coming out of the mine, but there wasn’t enough capacity in the smelter…

It’s a little like playing detective. Each clue leads to the next clue, until finally, you have all the pieces of your puzzle. And once they fit with each other, you can see the difference.

“In that 1 year, we were able to increase the output of the copper mine by 40–50%!”

The thrill was in the fact that no 2 projects were alike. From selling a hotel chain to launching a complete business operation, there was always something new to learn.

McKinsey was also a very caring employer. In 2011, Manu was on vacation in Egypt when the ‘January 25 Revolution’ gathered steam. Airports were shut down, mobile networks were blocked, it was a war-like situation. McKinsey arranged flight tickets for employees from any office across the world, who might be in Egypt at the time.

With the one and only Ratan Tata

“I wasn’t there on official work, but still, the McKinsey India office made sure my wife and I got 2 tickets and left safely. They really went out of the way…”

Many companies say ‘we are a family’, very few actually do what it takes.

And yet, after 5 years at McKinsey, Manu Jain was in a dilemma. He was now an EM (Engagement Manager), and could see 2 roads ahead:

1. Leave now.

2. Stay for another 5 years and aim to become a partner.

And if he did become a partner, well, it would make sense to then stay on and enjoy the money and the perks that came with it. Which was an attractive proposition. But.

“I just felt like this is the right time for me to move on.”

It’s normal for people to leave McKinsey, in fact, it’s even encouraged. Because much of their business comes from ex-employees who work with different industries.

But when Manu spoke with the many partners at the firm, they all said, “You are making a mistake.”

The mistake was the idea of leaving McKinsey to start something on his own. That too, in the tech industry. Many had tried, and most of them had failed.

“Join a PE or VC firm,” they advised. “Or the strategy division of a large corporate.”

Manu listened to them all, but he wasn’t swayed.

“The world around me was changing, I could see it, I could feel it…”

Now was the time to *be* that change. So he started exploring and evaluating various ideas in the tech domain: online healthcare, e-commerce for baby products, so on and so forth. When a junior from IIM Calcutta, Praveen Sinha, approached Manu. He was co-founding a company which was being incubated by Rocket Internet.

“Join us! We’re going to change the way India shops,” he said.

Manu’s first instinct was to say ‘no’. At that time, Flipkart sold books online—sure, that was possible. But who bought clothes and shoes online? The idea just didn’t seem to have merit.

It took about 2 months for Manu to get convinced *ki yeh ho sakta hai*, or at least, *try karna chahiye*. And he came on-board as a co-founder at jabong.com.

It was very early days for e-commerce. When they launched in January 2012, the Jabong team reckoned, “If we do 100 transactions a day, we will be a ‘great success’.”

By March, they had crossed 1,000 transactions a day—which was unbelievable! And one very interesting trend was coming to the fore.

“We could see that 60% of our traffic came from mobile phones.”

Back then, people weren’t using smartphones with large screens, and neither did Jabong have a mobile-friendly site or an app. It was completely counter-intuitive That’s when Manu realised that, in India, mobile was going to be THE thing. The engine of growth, the agent of change.

“I was hugely fascinated by the smartphone… the way it was giving access to millions of people who’d never used a computer at all.”

Somewhere in 2013, Manu stumbled upon a blog about a company called Xiaomi (pronunciation: Shao-me). The company was just 3 years old, had started selling phones in 2012, but was already one of the best-selling brands in China. The author of the blog stated —‘this is one of the most incredible companies in the mobile space’.

> *I gifted my 64-year-old dad a laptop, he never used it. Then I gifted him a smartphone and now he is on Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Maps, everything.*

Now most companies either focus on software (Google, Facebook, Microsoft) or hardware (Apple, Samsung, Nokia, Micromax). Xiaomi was the rare company doing both.

Manu reached out to Naveen Tewari, friend, mentor and also founder of InMobi.

"Hey, Naveen, do you know about Xiaomi?"

"Yes, I do," came the reply.

"Do you mind reaching out to the founder so I can have a chat with him?" requested Manu.

At that point, he wasn't looking for a job, or anything else in particular. It was just curiosity.

Company thi bhi kaafi interesting.

The founder of Xiaomi is maverick Chinese entrepreneur Lei Jun.

Prior to Xiaomi, he set up several multi-billion dollar businesses such as Kingsoft (listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange), Joyo (e-commerce site sold to Amazon, now Amazon China) and social gaming platform YY corporation (listed on NASDAQ).

Then, he 'retired' from business and did some crazy stuff. Like acting in movies (in the remake of *Godfather* in China, he played the role of—who else?—the godfather).

But then, in 2010, Lei Jun made a comeback. He started Xiaomi as a software company, which built an OS (Operating System) that could be used on any android phone.

"The cool thing was that Xiaomi was building features where people were telling us what to build. So the ideas were all crowdsourced."

Xiaomi's OS became hugely popular in the first 2 years, but Lei Jun wasn't satisfied. He wanted more users. Now, every person out there is not geeky enough to download and install an OS. So, what if Xiaomi could make and sell its own phones, pre-loaded with the OS? But, they did it very differently from other hardware companies.

Lei Jun's philosophy was: cut down costs, pass on benefits to the users. As a result, as soon as they were launched, Xiaomi phones became hugely popular in China.

It was fascinating stuff and Manu Jain was lucky enough to establish a connection with Bin Lin, one of the 8 co-founders (and a former head of engineering, Google China). They started having casual conversations on the phone, once a month. Just exchanging notes on India, on China and technology trends.

Meanwhile, Jabong had become one of the 2 largest fashion e-commerce companies in India. But in November 2013, Manu decided to leave Jabong.

"It was mainly for personal reasons. I had just become a father and wanted to spend time with my wife and son…"

All this while he'd been working from Delhi while Minu was in Bangalore. That didn't feel right anymore. Besides, Manu had set his heart on doing something of his own, in the mobile space. *Kya karna hai, yeh pata nahin*. So he did what any confused soul might do—set off on a 20-day backpacking trip.

But this trip was not about getting lost in the mountains of Nepal, it was all over China, from Beijing to Shanghai and Shenzen.

There, Manu met a whole lot of internet entrepreneurs, mobile entrepreneurs, understood the Chinese start-up ecosystem. Were these companies open and willing to meet a complete stranger? Surprisingly, yes. They were as keen to learn about India as Manu was to learn about them.

"Of course, I did have 2 good contacts in China who helped me set up 35 meetings in a very short span of time!"

It was also during this trip that Manu met the founders of Xiaomi for the first time, in person.

3 months later, Manu was still figuring out what to do, when the Xiaomi team pinged him.

"Hey, we are in India, would love to catch up with you over a coffee."

That's when Bin Lin shared the company's plans to enter India. Hence, they were looking for an India business head.

"We know you and think you understand our philosophy. Will you set up this venture for us?"

Manu was surprised. He'd been thinking of the mobile space but more in the area of an app or a service. Not selling phones themselves. Clearly, he lacked the domain expertise. But that was precisely the reason Xiaomi found him attractive. A person with mobile handset sales experience would have a certain mindset, *ki aise bechna hai*.

Whereas, Xiaomi did things very differently. *Jiske liye ek alag kism ka banda chahiye tha*.

Were you at all apprehensive about joining a Chinese company, I ask.

That wasn't a concern here, says Manu, because the founding team of Xiaomi had a lot of international exposure. They'd studied at Stanford and MIT, lived and worked in Singapore and Silicon Valley. What's more, Hugo Barra, from Google's android team, had recently joined the company. Adding to its multicultural credentials.

Of the 8 co-founders, 7 spoke excellent English. Lei Jun could understand the language but was more comfortable responding in Chinese, making use of an interpreter.

Well and good. What really tipped the scale, however, was the vision and mission of Xiaomi.

> *Xiaomi is a very interesting company, it's a start-up, it's an 8-year-old company. So in a way we're younger than Flipkart, Snapdeal, many others.*

The business model of Xiaomi was unique, it was disruptive.

"I sensed this could be a huge opportunity. To really *build* something."

Manu took the decision to join Xiaomi in April 2014, and joined in May. There was no team, no office, just Manu Jain, working out of a Costa Coffee next to the Flipkart headquarters in Bangalore. The usual modus operandi of any start-up founder. And the mindset with which Manu was working, as Operations Head, India.

Back then 'Xiaomi', or Mi phone, was unknown in India. So, who exactly would buy this Chinese brand? And where would it sell from? Setting up a retail network would take many months and a lot of investment. Whereas in China, Xiaomi had followed a unique strategy of selling its phones from just one location—online.

"I went to a lot of industry experts and they said your strategy won't work in India. You need to have TV ads, print ads and give a lot of margin to retailers…"

> *When I went and met 20–30 companies in China, I sensed that Xiaomi is in a very different league, the culture is different, the founders are different, they think differently.*

They could be right but, Manu reasoned, there was no harm in trying. He went ahead and imported 10,000 Mi3 handsets. Why 10,000? Because, at that time, Xiaomi India had a Facebook page with 10,000 followers. These folks knew about the company, they just might

buy the handset.

22 July 2014 saw the first ever sale of Mi phones on Flipkart. A good amount of traffic was expected. But nobody—not Flipkart, not Xiaomi—was prepared for what actually happened.

More than half a million customers attempted to log in and buy the phone. For the first time in its history, the Flipkart site crashed.

Sachin and Binny Bansal posted an apology on Twitter: "Working on getting this fixed ASAP."

The Xiaomi team in China—and its 1-man army in India—were ecstatic. *We have arrived*.

So, what was the magic? It was all in the product. Mi3 boasted incredible specs, comparable to Google's Nexus phone. What was even more incredible was the pricing of ₹ 13,999 (as against the ₹25–30,000 price of the Nexus). There was huge positive word-of-mouth. So huge that Xiaomi quickly announced a second sale—on 29 July.

This time Flipkart was taking no chances. They built a new tech platform—in just one week—to handle the traffic that was sure to come its way.

On D-day, Manu Jain was with Sachin Bansal, at the Flipkart office, counting down the seconds. At exactly 2 pm, he pressed the 'buy now' button. The message on the screen was 'out of stock'. Oof! *Site phir se crash ho gaya*? This was disappointing. But then the Flipkart team broke the good news.

"Your entire stock—10,000 units—sold out in the first 2 seconds!"

A third flash sale on 5 August saw 15,000 Mi3 phones sell out in the blink of an eye. So now the challenge was how to procure enough phones from China to fulfil demand. Manu realised that importing small batches was expensive and a hassle. That's when he came up with a crazy idea: "Let's charter flights!" The plane would carry just one precious cargo: Mi phones.

It was like Jabong, all over again. Knowing you have the freedom to take gut-level decisions. No corporate bullshit or hierarchy to slow you down. In fact, as Manu began building his team, he consciously chose people just like himself—ex-entrepreneurs. One such early recruit was Myshkin Ingawale,[2] co-founder of Biosense, who joined as Chief of Staff.

"We were not corporate employees with fixed working hours and well-defined work roles."

In fact, for the first few months, it was a lean, mean, 4-member team. Which slowly expanded to 30-odd people. This was a learning from Jabong days, where more than 500 employees were hired in the first 6 months. Many of whom were not a good fit with the company. This time, he would not repeat that mistake!

Soon after the launch, Xiaomi was looking to raise money globally. That's when Manu reached out to Ratan Tata's office for an appointment.

"I shared the Xiaomi story and philosophy with Mr Tata over a cup of tea. There was no PowerPoint, no documents on the table…"

Ratan Tata went on to invest in Xiaomi and also became a personal mentor to Manu. His faith in the company, and its CEO, was soon vindicated.

Between July and September 2014, Xiaomi sold 1 lakh phones in India. By the end of the year, the millionth unit had been shipped! With demand growing at such an astounding pace, Xiaomi India announced plans to set up a manufacturing facility in India. The plant was to be built in partnership with Foxconn[3] and located in Sri City, Andhra Pradesh.

"Local manufacturing showed our commitment to being in India for the long haul…"

Just 8 months after making the announcement, the first 'Made in India' handsets began rolling out from the Sri City plant. It was a case of production barely keeping up with demand. By this time, Xiaomi handsets were selling not only on Flipkart but Amazon India,

and also the company's own website mi.com.

In addition to phones, Xiaomi started selling fitness bands at the very economical price of ₹999. By the first quarter of 2016, Mi bands had taken the top spot with a 27% market share. In July that year, celebrating its second anniversary, Xiaomi India launched Mi power banks and Mi capsule earphones.

What is unusual is *how* they launched these products. No full-page ads in the newspaper, no TV ads, no hoardings.

"If I were to use a TV ad to reach out to 10 crore people, it would cost me at least ₹10 crores, if not more…"

Instead, Xiaomi achieved the same result at a cost of ₹10 lakh. By harnessing the power of social media. The company ran a campaign just before Diwali, offering 100 phones at ₹1 each. All you had to do was register for the sale on mi.com and allow the app to post this on your Facebook or Twitter page.

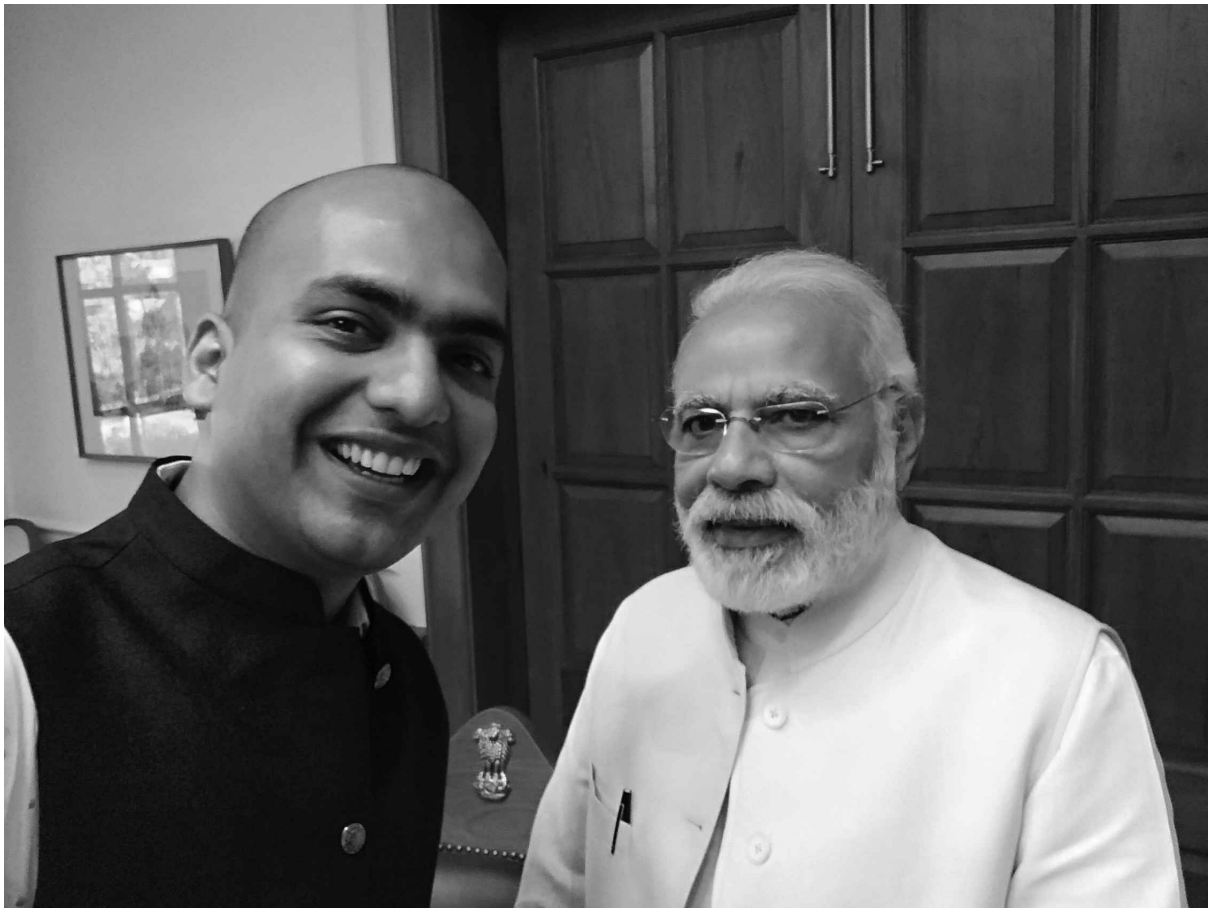
In no time, there were more than 10 lakh registrations. Now, by a conservative estimate, each of them would have at least 100 Facebook friends. So, in the process, 10 crore *junta* came to know about the Mi promotion. And all it cost the company was 100 phones worth ₹10,000 each.

To execute such a promotion, you need to really understand how people behave online. And for that you must think of it, not as a marketing tool, but your second home. This is why every member of the Xiaomi team—including the CEO—spends at least half an hour a day posting on their personal Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn pages.

"Most of our team is younger than me… they actually say that I am an oldie who doesn't live in today's world!"

In old-world marketing, the top management sits through a few focus group discussions to understand customers. But in the new order of things, Manu Jain is directly in touch with his user base. Anybody can register online and become part of the Mi Fan Club, a community of more than 2 million active users who discuss and dissect technology.

What's more, these clubs regularly meet offline, in various cities. These meets are planned by Mi fans themselves, with the company occasionally sponsoring T-shirts or free food. This works really well every time there is a new Mi phone being launched. No celebrities are invited to such events: all the excitement is generated by fans of Mi.



‘Yes, we will Make in India’

In fact, Mi fans also contribute ideas on how to improve user experience. A large number of people in India use dual SIM phones, but can use only one number for WhatsApp. When a customer brought this up, the Xiaomi developer team worked out a solution. So, now you can use WhatsApp on both SIMs.

“In India, you need an OTP[4] for almost everything, so we built a ‘copy OTP’ button which comes in very handy… again, it was an idea from a Mi fan.”

It is this cult following that Manu Jain acknowledged in a Facebook post in January 2017. He wrote, “We are truly excited to announce that Xiaomi India crossed a revenue of US$ 1 billion.… It speaks volumes about the love and trust Mi fans have for Xiaomi, and we are extremely thankful to everyone who was part of our journey.”

This milestone was reached with sales of over 2 million smartphones in the last quarter of 2016. Rattling the market leader Samsung where other brands had tried, and failed.

So what is it about Xiaomi that gives it an edge? Clearly, it’s the founder’s obsession with ‘making the customer happy’.

“One of the key things Lei Jun makes all of us do is use a product for at least 3 months before we launch it.”

Right now, Manu has a Mi Max phone in his hand, which has something written in Chinese. It is a ‘factory sample’. He, along with other Mi Board members, used the phone as their primary device for 6 months before it was launched for the general public. There have been times when a phone failed to meet expectations and the model was scrapped.

The obsession extends to testing products released by the competition. To know where Xiaomi stands in comparison.

“At any point of time, my desk, my drawers, my almirah—they’re all full of phones.

My wife gets really pissed at times!"

Every student of marketing knows about the 4Ps: Product, Price, Place and Promotion. But in today's world, the world of new-age tech, Manu believes one P is 100 times more important than the other 3. And that P is Product. If your product is not great, you cannot succeed—no matter what.

But the second P where Xiaomi really hits the bullseye, is Price. If you compare Mi with Samsung or HTC, feature for feature, spec for spec, the Xiaomi phone matches all of them, but will be half the price. So how exactly do they do it? Well, for one, the company gets its revenue from selling hardware but profits come from software and pre-loaded apps.

"Like Google and Facebook, we monetise these assets. For example, if you go to our newsfeed, there are paid links from which we earn a referral fee."

Secondly, Xiaomi believes in manufacturing 'just in time'. While other brands work on 3–4 months of inventory, Mi operates on weekly inventory. This is possible because the company's sales model is very different: no national, regional or city distributors who need to earn fat margins. The model it chose was e-commerce: direct to consumers.

In the beginning of 2017, 95% of Mi phones were being sold online. But then came a drastic change. Xiaomi decided to make its presence felt offline. Because there is still a large population out there that wants to touch and feel a phone before making a purchase. Or just isn't comfortable with e-commerce.

In China, Xiaomi runs exclusive stores, or 'Mi Homes', where customers can check out the company's newest and coolest products. But when Manu approached Phoenix Market City mall in Bangalore, to open the first 'Mi Home' in India, he was in for a rude shock. The management offered space on the lower ground floor (basement).

"We have too many mobile shops in the mall already," they said.

"*Theek hai*—basement will do," said Manu. However, he was sure there would be a huge amount of traffic on the first day. So he asked for extra billing counters in the atrium.

The Phoenix management turned him down.

"You guys are overestimating," they said. "If you get 100 customers on day 1, it will be a big success for you!"

On the morning of 20 May 2017, there was a 2-km long queue of customers waiting to get inside. Some of whom had travelled from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and UP. The company had made a promise that, no matter what, stocks would be available in the offline store. And if a particular model sold out, a special code would be provided so the customer could buy it online.

On that first day, the Mi Home store clocked sales of ₹5 crores,[5] breaking all records. The next morning, the MD of Phoenix called Manu and struck a deal.

"We want a Mi Home store in each of our malls…!"

While it sounds all smooth and easy, the Mi team has made its share of mistakes. One very wrong decision was to copy what other mobile phone brands were doing, i.e., create a wide distribution network and sell from every possible retail outlet. Since margins on Mi phones are lower than average, there was little incentive to push the brand.

> *I should be comfortable with using a phone as my primary device and then only will I launch it. Which is a very high bar.*

The strategy was a fail and led to a lot of introspection. The company then corrected course and completely changed the game with a scheme called 'Mi Preferred Partner'. The

idea was simple: every locality has a plethora of small shops selling mobile phones. In each area, Xiaomi would partner with *one* retailer and sell Mi phones only through that store.

The advantage is that every person who wants to buy a Mi phone will go to that one shop, thus driving huge traffic to this retailer. At the time, Xiaomi had a 24% share of the market, so one can extrapolate that 24 out of every 100 people who want a phone will gravitate towards the Mi preferred partner.

While the 76 people who want other brands will be scattered among all the remaining sellers in the market.

"All of a sudden, the Mi partner's business increases tremendously and within 1 month, he becomes the biggest retailer in the market!"

The Mi partner is actually free to sell other brands, but since 80-90% of his business comes from Xiaomi, that's what he focuses on.

The second aspect of this model is that other brands offer a 10% margin on each sale, whereas Xiaomi offers only 5%. But still, it works for the partner.

> *At IIM, they teach you a lot of stuff about marketing but they don't drill in this fact that the most important thing about a product… is the product itself.*

To understand how, we need to understand the maths.

If a retailer sells 100 phones of brand X in a month, he must buy at least 50 phones at one time. Let's say each phone costs ₹10,000, so that's an investment of ₹5 lakh. With a profit of 10%, he makes ₹50,000. By rotating the money twice in a month, the retailer finally makes ₹1 lakh by blocking ₹5 lakh. So the Return on Investment (ROI) is 20%.

In case of Xiaomi, the retailer needs to buy only 5 phones a day. Once those are sold, he buys another 5 phones. The investment is ₹50,000, while the profit he makes is ₹2,500 per lot. Multiplied by 30 days, his monthly income is ₹75,000 on an investment of just ₹50,000. So the ROI is 125%.

Well, it sounds a bit complicated, but for the trading community, which runs small retail stores, this makes eminent sense. At the same time, Mi keeps costs down and sells at lower prices.

"Our is not a push model, it is a pull model… and a win-win for all."

In the last 18 months, the company has set up more than 100 Mi Home stores and tied up with 2,000 preferred partners. This has resulted in stupendous growth for the company. By the third quarter of 2017, Mi phone sales went up from 3 million a quarter to 9 million a quarter.[6] Making it the number 1 smartphone brand in India, toppling Samsung.

Xiaomi has now been the number 1 smartphone brand in India for 5 consecutive quarters—from Q3 2017 to Q3 2018 (as per IDC).

"1 out of 2 phones sold online is Xiaomi, while our overall market share is 27.5%."

India is Xiaomi's biggest and fastest growing market globally. The company was originally structured as 'China' and 'Rest of the World', now it's 'China', 'India' and 'Rest of the World'.

This gigantic business is run by a total of 600+ people, which includes the Product Team, Logistics, Warehousing, Import Clearance, Customer Care, Aftersales, Administration —the works.

Walk into the Xiaomi office in Bangalore and you are unlikely to see a foreign face. It's run for India by Indians, which is quite different from the way any other Chinese

company operates. While Bin Lin is the official ‘Project Manager’ for the India business, the local team has full autonomy in most areas.

In addition to his role as Managing Director for Xiaomi India, Manu Jain is a Global Vice President, making him one of the 10–12 key decision-makers in the company.

“What I really look forward to are deep conversations with our founder Lei Jun… when we spend a week together, our discussions go on for, like, 10 hours.”

These discussions are not around business plans, or profitability or market share. What Lei Jun cares most about is whether Mi products are high quality or not; are they customising enough for the Indian market or not. Are they growing that market, to bring in the millions of users who are still using feature phones?

At the 40th anniversary celebrations of Reliance Industries, Manu had an animated discussion with Mukesh Ambani. And found they shared the ‘exact same vision’.

In fact, Jio and Mi have had a very successful tie-up which has made smartphones a ‘way of life’ for the common man.

It’s not just about selling phones, or tablets. Xiaomi has this whole vision for a future where all kinds of devices talk to each other. Using ‘mi’ (mobile internet). Imagine the convenience of using a smart electric rice cooker, smart water purifier, smart luggage and smart shoes—all of this and much more is already being sold in China on mi.com.

What gives these devices IQ is the connectivity they enjoy with your smartphone.

“So, the moment you walk into the office, your smart kettle starts boiling water!”

Or, sitting in the office, you can check the air quality at home. Anytime the filter is about to die, it sends you a message, ‘Replace now’, and orders the same on the Mi shopping app.

Now you might wonder how can one company produce all these diverse products? The answer is, they’re made by different companies who are part of the Mi ecosystem. Xiaomi has invested in over 75 such entrepreneurial ventures who specialise in various niche products. In fact, they even own Segway[7] and have plans to launch smart scooters in India.

In March 2018, Xiaomi launched smart TVs in India, selling 500,000 units in just 6 months. They will now be manufacturing the 32-inch and 43-inch models in India in collaboration with home-grown Dixon Technologies, at a newly set up facility near Tirupati. This is in addition to a unit manufacturing power banks[8] and 5 smartphone plants located across Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

> *Even when we sell through physical stores, there is only one layer between us and the consumer, so it’s much more efficient.*

“Our factories now employ more than 10,000 people, of which 95% are women.”

The latest ‘big bang’ was the simultaneous opening of 500+ rural retail stores (called ‘Mi Stores’) at 12 noon, on 29 October 2018. Creating a Guinness Book world record.

And this is just the beginning. There are many businesses that Xiaomi could launch in India, including financing, movies and entertainment, and MVNO (Mobile Virtual Network Operator). In the long run, these are expected to make more money for the company than selling hardware.

Xiaomi is the biggest content aggregator in China, which is distributed through its smart TVs on subscription or pay-per-view basis. To fund its ambitious expansion plans, the company raised about US$ 3 billion on the Hang Seng (Hong Kong stock exchange). However, the share price has fallen since the listing due to scepticism of investors.

Because it's not a 'pure internet company' like Alibaba or Baidu. And its business model is not a clone of any Silicon Valley company. So how can we be sure it will succeed… This outlook does not bother Manu Jain, who has a small stake in the company but a big belief in its vision. And is enjoying the enormous challenge it entails.

"I don't think I've ever enjoyed my work as much as I have in the last 4 years."

Manu gets into office at 8 am and spends the first one-and-a-half hours checking emails and planning his day. While many start-ups and tech companies in Bangalore have a culture of starting work by 11 or noon, Manu believes it's better to come in early and leave early, so you have some time to spend with family.

One way to make this happen is the free breakfast, which stops at 9.30 am sharp. A carrot which has worked much better than any stick!

The day is usually packed with meetings but ends by 7 pm, unless something goes wrong.

Once home, it's quality time with wife Minu and son Jordan but often, after he is asleep, Manu will log in and clean up his inbox and reply to mails from the team. But on weekends, he tries 'not to work too much'.

Manu spends at least 2 hours on Saturday and 2 hours on Sunday on fitness. He's a big fan of Cult, the new gym started by Mukesh Bansal (founder of Myntra).

"He should give me some stake… because I've got some 20 people I know to sign up too!"

On Sundays, Manu and 5-year-old Jordan have a father-son ritual. Where they spend time together, at a gym for kids.

Manu also loves baking 'healthy cakes' for his son, using multi-grain atta, dates and olive oil (in place of maida, sugar and butter). His favourite recipe? Banana, walnut, almond cake.

Then there's the youngest member of the family—Buddy, a Labrador pup adopted last year. Manu enjoys taking him out for a morning walk.

And lastly, there is the signature shiny bald look… which Manu has chosen over having a hair transplant.

Like a true rockstar.

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[1] Ireena Vittal is no longer with McKinsey but serves on boards of several companies. She is an IIMC graduate.

[2] Myshkin is no longer with Xiaomi. His most recent innovation is I2U2, an affordable telepresence robot which can be controlled remotely through a mobile, tablet or PC.

[3] A Taiwanese company which is best known as the manufacturer of the iPhone and iPad.

[4] One-time password.

[5] An average Croma store does sales of ₹5 crores a year.

[6] As per IDC estimates, Mi shipped a whopping 11.7 million units in Q3 2018.

[7] Xiaomi has invested in Ninebot, which acquired Segway in 2015.

[8] Mi is currently the number 1 seller of power banks in India.

It’s the eye of the tiger
It’s the thrill of the fight
Risin’ up to the challenge of our rivals
And the next new smartphone
Haunts our dreams in the night
While he’s watchin us watchin us all…
The eye of the tiger

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

To succeed, there are 3 things that you have to do. The first and most important is Product. In today's new-age world, if you want to do something of your own and you are not focusing on product, there's something wrong.

People say 'I am building a product' but I will outsource it to somebody else. I tell that founder please shut down your company right away because if that's the way you want to run it, it will never work. You have to be deeply involved, you have to drive it.

If you're not building a great and truly differentiated product, you can never succeed. You will only end up wasting a lot of money—either your own, or VC money.

Point number 2 is, you have to be passionate about something. It could be anything, but know what that passion is.

For example, when I graduated from IIMC, I was very clear I didn't want to do banking, I want to do something which will give me business experience.

But I meet a lot of students who say, 'I don't want to do banking… still I will apply for banking because it pays a lot of money'. I tell them this is the wrong way to think about life.

In 15 years, most people will have similar net worth. Some will be exceptionally high, some exceptionally low but 60–80% will be in a middle range. So it really doesn't matter. What matters is how you can be really good at what you do, what you really enjoy, and that can only happen when you know what you are passionate about.

Point number 3: have perseverance. Especially in today's start-up world. Things will go wrong no matter how good your plans are. Be mentally prepared for it. Every founder I know will tell you stories of how things have gone wrong. But what made them successful was, they were able to move on, quickly react to that particular situation.

When things go wrong, people will say lot of negative stuff about you, write negative stuff about you. Do not let that affect you.

VINEET GAUTAM

Bestseller India

In the year 2010, Vineet Gautam joined a Danish company which no one in India had heard of. By the end of 2015, Bestseller India had achieved sales of ₹ 997 crores, with 100 plus stores and 2,000 employees. Proving that you can run a profitable brick and mortar business, selling dreams to young people, even in this digital age.

ATTENTION TO RETAIL

Vineet Gautam is a rolling stone who's gathered a lot of moss.

He's stood in a kitchen and fried hash browns. Run a profitable pizza store. Set up half a dozen coffee shops. Hopped across to the fashion industry. Then, the telecom industry.

So, why did he change so many jobs, so many industries?

"Whenever I felt I am getting 'too comfortable'… I would get restless…"

This is nowhere more evident than in his 20s, when Vineet worked with ITC. A wonderful old-world company which takes great care of its employees.

Common sense suggests this is an organisation to join—and stick on for life.

Instead, Vineet was attracted to the new and exciting telecom industry, where he had to—in some sense—establish himself from scratch.

So what do you take away from each new assignment? What does that bullet point on your LinkedIn CV actually mean?

I am reminded of one of my favourite television shows, *MasterChef Australia*, where contestants are put to a 'pressure test'. Each time, there is a goal and a limited amount of time. The same raw material is available to each chef—it's what you choose and how you combine it that makes the difference.

And sometimes, it goes a step further with an 'invention test'. Where you get a Mystery Box containing ingredients to work with.

I think this is what modern careers are: a series of pressure tests. Sometimes the role is very well-defined and sometimes, it's like the Mystery Box.

Your skills, your temperament, your personal leadership style, simmered on the flame of 'experience', is what makes you a masterchef.

Who can take any set of ingredients and create a recipe called 'success'.

Vineet Gautam is a proud Punjabi who's always lived outside Punjab.

"I was born in Moradabad (UP) and grew up in Kolkata. But originally, we are from Dera Baba Nanak, a small town on the border of India and Pakistan."

Growing up, Vineet's father had seen a lot of hardship. So he slogged to give Vineet and his younger sister a better upbringing, better schooling. The siblings attended Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan school in Kolkata, where Vineet was a good student but never a topper. Partly because he spent a lot of his time playing cricket, and video games.

"I scored 69% in Class 10 board exams and wanted to take Science but the school said my marks are only good enough for Commerce."

So Vineet was packed off to Moradabad, to stay with his tauji. *Lekin baat bani nahin*. Feeling homesick, the 16-year-old returned to Kolkata after 8 months.

Luckily, the following year, Vineet got a Science seat in his own school, although he now had to study in his sister's batch. That year, Vineet also appeared for various engineering entrance exams. However, he did not fare well in any of them. Finally, he settled for a little known engineering college in Dhule, Maharashtra.

"The campus was not that great, infrastructure was still developing… but I did make some good friends there!"

But less than 6 months after joining the college, Vineet got an unexpected call. It was from the Institute of Hotel Management, Delhi.

"You had appeared for our entrance exam… you have been selected!"

It was something Vineet had done just for a lark. Out of curiosity, he went for the interview.

There, he learnt that the hotel industry was booming and desperately in need of manpower. Under pressure from the government, IHM was therefore starting a new batch.

And just like that, Vineet quit engineering and took up hotel management. Going against the conventional wisdom, and the 'advice of elders'.

"I just felt that hotel management is something new, something glamorous… at least from the outside, it seemed like that."

As the batch was new, the course was very unstructured. Generally, students are sent to a hotel for training after completing 1 year. But this batch of IHM began their internship even before starting classes! Vineet was placed at The Claridges, a very old and well-known hotel in Delhi. Where he worked with the accounts department.

> *It is important to put the data in front of your boss, if you want the right decision to be taken.*

Later, he did a second internship with ITC Sheraton for 6 months. By the end of it, he realised it was not about learning anything. The worst was banquets, where you set up, serve, and then clear up. You sleep in the bunker for 6 hours, freshen up and get back to work. Mindless, back-breaking work.

Vineet was luckier than most. The head of training was short of an assistant, so he got the intern to pitch in. And thus exposed him to what a manager's job is all about.

"I realised that I am not cut out for hardcore operations. I enjoy planning, scheduling,

making things work as per plan."

When the time came for placement, Vineet did not sit for the interviews held by Taj and Oberoi (the biggest names at that time) but he did apply to Marriott, which was just entering India.

Then, one morning, he saw an advertisement in the newspaper: 'Nirula's is looking for management trainees'. And that's where Vineet Gautam began his career. Each morning he travelled from Faridabad (where his family had relocated), to the Nirula's training institute in Noida. The training was both technical and operational, starting at ground zero.

"I remember doing 20 days of dishwashing and every day you go back home, your hands are almost melting…"

Trainees worked in the kitchen for 3 months, preparing everything from tandoori items to dosa. So, how was this any different from working at Taj or Oberoi?

For one, the work culture was far more egalitarian. At 5-stars, managers entered from the front door while staff was told to use the back door. They even ate in separate kitchens. In the restaurant business, there was no such discrimination. And there was a clearly demarcated career path.

"There was an assurance that after training, you will move into a supervisor role."

Thus, Vineet got his first posting as a supervisor for a Nirula's restaurant in Faridabad. Within 18 months he'd moved up to Floor Manager and was placed at the prestigious Connaught Place outlet. But no matter what his designation, Vineet continued to shoulder some responsibility in the kitchen. Because it was a small team—everyone had to pitch in.

"Nirula's had these amazing hash browns—I remember making 200 hash browns every day in the morning shift!"

2-and-a-half years later, Vineet decided to move to Domino's Pizza, which was expanding in a big way. He joined as Assistant Floor Manager for their GK-1 store. Unlike Nirula's, this was primarily a delivery business, and one with an international footprint. So the SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) were completely different.

"Everything was mapped. The pizzas had to be at the right temperature, the right quality, with right condiments and delivery in 30 minutes."

To keep the 30-minute promise, store managers worked backwards. When does traffic peak? When do orders peak? Manpower had to be scheduled accordingly.

There were hundreds of checklists, which had to be completed at the end of each shift.

Every store manager was a 'P & L' head. Hence, he had to know the food cost, delivery cost, local marketing cost and 'head office cost' which is debited to each store.

"The Store Manager was responsible for his outlet making money."

The GK-1 outlet managed by Sumit Ghidliyal was certainly doing that. Vineet learnt a lot, working with him and other seniors. One of the exciting things back then was the early-morning meeting at India Gate. Managers would gather at 6 am and run a couple of kilometres Sometimes, the Head of Sales or the Domino's India CEO would join in.

During one such meeting, the National Operations Manager walked up to Vineet and said, "Congratulations, you are going to the Shanti Niketan outlet as Store Manager!"

Vineet was thrilled to bits but his boss looked worried.

"Hope you know, Shanti Niketan's last four store managers have been sacked!"

It looked like a job nobody wanted… but Vineet decided to take up the challenge.

The next morning, he met the outgoing manager who filled him in on all the problems.

'Boss ekdum bekaar hai.' 'There are huge issues with people.' 'Everything is on fire.'

The Shanti Niketan store was 4 times the size of GK-1, in terms of business. Being close to various embassies and Vasant Kunj, the order load was huge. And so were the pressures.

At 11.30 am the Area Manager, Pankaj Sood, called and said to Vineet, "Welcome to

Hell!"

The warning did not affect Vineet Gautam, a kid with just 3 years of experience. *Koi darr nahin, koi fikar nahin…* let me give it a shot!

The first thing he addressed was the complete lack of team spirit. There were 32 employees, all of whom had fights with each other. And their managers. So what did he do? Lead by example. For 3 months, Vineet Gautam practically lived in the store. Most nights, he slept in his dad's Maruti 800, got up in the morning and was back to work.

> *A great entrepreneur is one who allows professionals to run the organisation without interfering on a day-to-day basis.*

"My team saw that I was serious, I was committed, and then they started to back me up."

They also found in Vineet a manager willing to listen to their concerns. It was a high-pressure, high-volume store—the workload was very high. The store needed additional manpower, but no one had the guts to tell the boss. Vineet had developed a rapport with him, though, and so presented a strong case, backed by data.

A week later, three Assistant Managers were deputed to the Shanti Niketan store. Delivery time improved dramatically.

"Better delivery meant fewer losses. Because it was '30 minutes or your order is free'."

There were other issues like pilferage of Coke cans (which caused enormous loss) and the constant breakdown of scooters. At any given time, out of 30 vehicles, 8 would not be functioning. Each time, Vineet would put forth a case to his Area Manager, get him to understand the issue and work out a solution.

It took about 4 months to set the ship right. Shanti Niketan zoomed to the very top, to become the number 1 most profitable store in Delhi NCR.

And it was not just about fixing problems but also taking some risks. Vineet proposed that they expand the store's delivery area to the Cantonment. It was a bit tight logistically but he was convinced 'we can do it'. Each pizza would take 2 minutes to prepare, 6 minutes to cook and 12 minutes to deliver. Leaving enough margin for traffic and other delays.

"I fought hard for it and convinced my boss… and we did go ahead."

'The difficult boss' and the 'first-time Store Manager' disagreed on many fronts but agreed on the most important one: 'We do what's best for the store'.

> *Work with people, understand them, solve their issues and then get your own work done.*

At the end of 1-and-a-half years, the Shanti Niketan store was raking in ₹8 lakh in profit every month. However, Vineet's salary had barely increased from ₹8,000 to ₹8,300.

The reason was simple: while a few Domino's outlets were making big money, others were barely breaking even. Some, which had opened in towns like Bareilly, had to be shut down.

"Our CEO at the time, Virag Joshi, had a dream of opening 100 stores in 100 days."

At the same time, he wanted to make pizzas more Indianised, more affordable. One experiment in this direction was the chhole-pizza, which was introduced at ₹50.

It was a brave new idea but didn't click with consumers.

Meanwhile, Jubilant Foodworks—the India franchisee for Domino's—had to pay out large sums as royalties to the parent company.

Employees got the short end of the stick, even if they were high performers.

One day, Vineet asked Pankaj, "What is the use of working so hard?"

He replied, "*Thoda sabar kar…* have patience."

Well, that is one thing you can be sure a hot-blooded young Punjabi male does not have.

Cafe Coffee Day (CCD) was entering Delhi. Vineet went for the walk-in interview and was selected as one of 2 Area Managers. The pay was more than twice the salary in Domino's. And the role was exciting. There was one month of training in Bangalore, and then you were out in the field, scouting for properties, building a team, launching stores.

More entrepreneurial than any of his earlier jobs—there wasn't even a proper office! The 2 Area Managers simply used a desk at 'Way to Wealth', a sister concern of CCD.

But quickly, a few things became clear. While the founder of Cafe Coffee Day, V G Siddhartha, was a visionary, his Operations team did not share that vision. He'd roped in a veteran of the food industry, Naresh Malhotra, as CEO. Malhotra, in turn, was trying to bring in professionals into what was essentially a family-run business.

In 6 months' time, Vineet had set up 6 CCD outlets, which was fantastic, but he wasn't happy with the work environment.

"To run a store, you need to take many calls and decisions… here there was someone always looking over your shoulder, doubting you…"

Both the Area Managers flew to Bangalore, shared their concerns with the head of HR and head of Operations. But the effort failed. So, they returned to Delhi and put in their papers.

But something good did come out of this short stint. While conducting walk-in interviews for the newly opened CCD stores, Vineet met Anu.

"We became friends, then she became my girlfriend… and then, my wife."

The next job 'just happened' through a chance conversation—the company was Wills Lifestyle, a division of ITC. The interview call came through a consultant.

"Can you go and meet them today?" he said.

Vineet wasn't wearing a tie, so he went and bought one. There were 3 rounds of interviews, with the HR, the Regional Manager, and then the CEO.

The next morning they said, "Congratulations! You've been selected as a Store Manager."

After working as an Area Manager, this was a demotion of sorts. Plus, the city they were posting him to was Lucknow. Vineet's parents were perplexed.

"First, you were selling *chhole-kulche* and now you want to sell clothes… *kar kya rahe ho?* What do you want to do in life?"

But in his heart, Vineet felt it would be a good move. ITC was a great company and Wills Lifestyle was a new concept. And though Vineet had no experience in apparel, they didn't see it as a problem. In fact, they wanted people from the service industry because the Wills Lifestyle model was based on service.

Having shifted from engineering to hotel management, and then from hotels to the restaurant industry, Vineet had a certain keeda within.

"I wanted to prove myself… so each job I took, I really worked hard, put a lot of thought, tried out new ideas. This was another such opportunity."

Changing the outlook of the entire organisation

from wholesale to retail was my big challenge.

The next day, Vineet took his parents to the Wills Lifestyle flagship store in South Extension market. They were happy to see it wasn't a run-of-the-mill garments store.

The first 15 days at ITC were spent in a rigorous training program. The new recruit was taught everything about how the fabric is made: what is warp, what is weft. But the main focus was on customer service: how to talk to and sell to each person who walks into a Wills Lifestyle store.

After the rough and ready work culture in the food industry, the 'ITC way' was a pleasant surprise for Vineet. When he landed in Lucknow—a completely new city for him—the local ITC branch made sure he was looked after. An old-fashioned courtesy that is not so common in corporate life today.

The Wills Lifestyle store in Lucknow had just been inaugurated. Vineet's Regional Manager said to him, "I am expecting sales of ₹25 lakh per month—hope you are able to deliver!"

This is not Delhi, Vineet thought to himself… *Yahan itna sale hoga?*

Exceeding all expectations, the Hazratganj store did ₹34 lakh in sales in the very first month. There was no looking back from there.

It was a small team of just 4 people. The shop was owned by a very old nawaabi family, who lived in a big house, just behind the store. Everyone became like 'family'.

"We used to spend a lot of time together, party a lot, enjoy a lot and work together as a team and not as employee-boss. In fact, we are all still good friends!"

Here again, oftentimes Vineet would stay back at night in the office, sleeping on a couch. He would tell the team, "Go home, be with your family—I will finish up."

The Wills Lifestyle stores had a common look and feel across geographies. But the Store Manager could decide what to order and how to display merchandise.

The trendiest customers in Lucknow came to shop at Wills Lifestyle—there weren't many of them, but those who came, bought a lot. So it was important to build a relationship with them.

"Each of us had a list of twenty customers whom we knew inside out… in that respect we were almost more like the hotel industry."

No amount of market research can predict customer behaviour. When Wills Lifestyle launched leather jackets at ₹14,000, it was thought *ki Lucknow mein kaun khareedega*.

In fact, the store got 8 orders and people were even ready to pay in advance!

ITC was also strong on process—the IT system was robust, ahead of its time. Customer data was important, but so was customer insight. Vineet noticed that people were hesitant to enter the store. How to make it less intimidating? One of the things he did was move the security guard *inside* the store. There was a noticeable rise in footfalls.

It was a 6-day work-week with 1 day off. That's when Vineet boarded the night train to Delhi, spent time with his family and girlfriend, and took the night train back.

After a year in Lucknow, Vineet was offered a role as Manager of the Connaught Place store in Delhi. It was a mega-outlet, one of the top-performing stores in the country. When the company had its first ever End of Season Sale, the queue at this store was so long, it took customers 3 hours to get entry inside.

"Our glass door almost got broken, garments were on the floor. It was a tough day!"

While most people join a company like ITC and stay on for life, Vineet became restless after 2 years. So when a good offer came from Idea Cellular, he decided to take it.

ITC refused to relieve him—please reconsider, they said—but Vineet had made up his mind.

One of the perks of the new job was a car, so Vineet decided it was time to sell his bike. The day before he was to join the new company, he rode to Faridabad to meet a buyer. On the way, he had a horrific accident. With a knee broken in 3 places, Vineet was rushed to a nearby hospital.

He called Anu and said, “Please call my boss and let them know I can’t join tomorrow.”

The bigger worry was *ki aagey kya hoga*. Having left one job and not even joined the next one, Vineet was in a state of limbo. But his anxiety was soon relieved.

Idea sent an admin person, they sent an ambulance, and moved Vineet to Apollo Hospital. The next day his boss and boss’ boss came to visit.

“I realised how other companies were treating people and how Idea was so different…”

They kept his position, paid his salary, waited for him to join after 3 months of bed rest. When Vineet started coming to office, it was only for 4 hours a day (he was still on crutches).

Preparing for a big hit

“Even the CEO would walk across from the other building to meet me… that was how people were treated there.”

Vineet had no experience of telecom but he did understand retail very well. And Idea was facing a problem there. The company was operating 22 stores on a franchise model but they were making losses. With sim cards available everywhere, there was no need to visit an Idea store to buy one. So what would be the source of income for the franchisee?

The solution was a franchise model which was service-driven and not sales-driven.

Each franchisee was allocated key customers, their job was to make sure these customers were happy. Part of the revenue thus generated was shared with the franchisee.

With this new model, Idea Cellular was able to turn around all 22 stores and open 8 more. Vineet worked directly with the CEO, Rajendra Chourasia, to formulate and implement it.

One key decision was to depute an Idea employee at each franchise store. Of course, hiring 30 people and putting them on the field was an additional cost.

"But again, as I said, you have to present what is the benefit at the end of the day. And if you are able to show the benefit, I think, anyone and everyone is ready to invest in it."

It was also important to listen to the franchisees, understand them, solve their issues.

And when 1 or 2 outlets followed the model, the other franchisees got interested. If he can make money, so can I? *Bhai, try karte hain*.

At the end of 2 years, Vineet had become the Head of Service, Delivery and Quality and was offered a role at Idea's corporate office. Heading the retail for 11 states was a big promotion and the money was good, too. So Vineet and his newly-wed wife Anu packed their bags and shifted to Pune.

When he reached there, Vineet realised, 'Everything is in a mess!' 11 states were more like 11 countries. At that time, Idea Cellular was a joint venture of the Birlas, Tatas and AT & T. Some stores were operated as Tata stores, some as Birla stores. They looked different, followed different systems and processes.

"The only thing in common was, most of them were losing money… it was a nightmare."

The problem is that, in telecom, stores are a cost centre which nobody wants to own. Yes, it builds the brand but marketing doesn't want to pay for it. Neither does sales.

What's more, there is a matrix structure, so to get work done, you need to involve the Marketing Head, the Service Delivery guy, the Sales guy and the Big Boss. All of whom are likely to be strong-headed individuals. Luckily, Vineet found strong supporters in his CEO, Vikram Mehmi, and the Head of Service Delivery, Amar Babu.

With best practices and new business models, Vineet was able to standardise all 1,100 franchise stores. As well as open in new circles such as UP (East), Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh.

During this process, the Idea Cellular joint venture ended, the entity was taken over by Aditya Birla. So there were many changes—from the logo to working style. Earlier, the CEO had full charge and could take quick decisions. Now, everything went to the Board for approval. Making it very hard to implement any new idea.

When Vineet proposed a training program for the 1,100 Idea franchisees, the Board shot it down, saying, "There is no ROI (Return on Investment)."

But everything *cannot* give tangible returns. Loyalty, bonding, motivation—this is the invisible oil on which business runs.

Another issue Vineet faced was working with a tough boss. A very sharp man, but one who was loath to take decisions. Ask him to sign any document and he would take months. While any other manager may have quit in frustration, Vineet took it in his stride. And found a way to make things work.

With the takeover by Aditya Birla, the corporate office shifted to Mumbai. Vineet and his wife reluctantly began looking at houses—they were not keen to shift—when the same consultant who had arranged the Wills Lifestyle interview called him and said, "There is a position in United Colours of Benetton… would you like to apply?"

It was a brief interview lasting just 15 minutes. The consultant was flummoxed—the Director of Sales was known to spend 2 hours with each candidate.

"Okay, so they are not interested in me," thought Vineet.

But they did shortlist him and there was a second interview in Gurgaon with the MD of Benetton. The role was 'Retail Head, South and West'.

Technically, it was a demotion from a 'national' role to a regional one. But Vineet didn't give that much importance.

"Designations have never mattered to me.… I found the job exciting and took it up."

Benetton had been in India for more than 20 years, first as a JV with DCM and then on its own. It was a franchise-driven model, very strong in the north (with 100 stores) but weak in west and south zones (just 24 stores). So there was a lot of scope to grow. What's more, Benetton wanted to move from the franchise model to company-owned stores.

Which meant shifting from a wholesale mindset to a retail one.

A 3-year plan was formulated—legacy franchisees were taken over, even as new outlets were opened in malls and high streets. In 2-and-a-half years, Vineet set up 70-odd stores, with 500 people working under him. In the process, everything changed: how you were buying, the price mix, the product mix.

"Earlier, the north franchisee called the shots because he had the volumes… but in the south and west, there is no winter, so what sells in Delhi cannot be sold here!"

Unlike Domino's, the Italians did not provide an SOP. Which meant you had the freedom to create the rules. As a result, Benetton India's sales more than doubled in just 2-and-a-half years. But the shift from the franchise model to company-owned stores came at a cost.

You invest today, you see returns in 3 years' time. But who has the patience?

All of a sudden, there was a change of guard in Italy. The Board decided to take a short-term view and gave a diktat: shift all stores back to the franchise model.

The team which had worked so hard to take the company in one direction was asked to go in a completely opposite direction. *Yeh kuch hajam nahin hua*.

"There were a lot of disagreements… it was like a war in the office, every day."

Well, that can only mean one thing—time to move on. Through a contact on LinkedIn, Vineet got an offer from Dubai-based Etisalat telecom, for the role of Head of Sales. At the same time, there was a call from a London-based consultant for a job with a company called 'Bestseller'.

> *Pricing once done, cannot be undone. When you launch a product, people form a perception and that sticks.*

"I don't have any experience in books!" said Vineet.

That's when he learnt that Bestseller A/S is a privately held family-owned clothing company based in Denmark. With brands like Jack & Jones, Only and Vero Moda.

Which were unheard of in India.

At the time, Bestseller had opened 2 Jack & Jones stores in Mumbai, with the help of their local partner Bombay Rayon—one of the largest apparel exporters in India.

"Why don't you meet the MD of Bombay Rayon once?" said the consultant.

The interview was scheduled for 2 pm. Vineet reached the Bombay Rayon office in Chandivili on time. 5 pm. 6 pm. 7 pm. 8 pm. There was no sign of Mr Prashant Agarwal.

At 9.30 pm, he was asked to go to another office in Chandivali, as the MD was expected there. The interview started at 12.30 am and went on till 2.30 am.

Vineet took it in his stride and they parted on a good note. But at the end of the interaction, he was clear. This was not a set-up he wanted to join.

In August 2009, Vineet moved to Mumbai to join Etisalat. The company had bought out Swan Telecom and was trying to establish a network. Hundreds of people had been hired

across all functions. Vineet had retained a design agency to do a ‘mock store’. But there was no sense of urgency.

Nothing was really happening…

Bestseller remained in touch. They set up a meeting with Anders Povlsen, who’d recently inherited the company from his father. Every month or so, Vineet would also link up with Prashant Agarwal. They enjoyed bouncing ideas off each other, with no specific agenda. Just 3–4 hours talking about life, business and retail.

In November 2009, Vineet got a shock when he reached the office. The team from Etisalat Dubai had vanished overnight. There were whispers of fraud and bribery charges—what would come to be known as the ‘2 G scandal’. For the next 1 month, every day, telecom regulators and inspectors were all over the office. Inspecting papers, asking questions.

Work came to a complete standstill. There was nothing to do but browse Orkut all day.

“My salary was getting paid but I didn’t get a good feeling. Like something is not right.”

In mid-December, Vineet called up his wife and said he was accepting Bestseller’s offer. The money was less, the company was not known, the working style was different.

But when you’re standing at the edge of a cliff, all you can do is leap…

On 1 January 2010, Vineet Gautam joined as Brand Head for Vero Moda. On the first day, he arrived at the office of Bestseller India. It was not very impressive.

There were just 4 people there—1 guy in HR, 1 in Finance, 1 in Operations, 1 in Projects. Vineet asked the Projects guy what he was working on.

‘Sir, something is happening but I am not aware of the details,” he replied. “For 1 month, I have been coming to office daily; I sit and read the newspaper and go back home.”

It was a pretty depressing scenario. Luckily, Vineet was off to Denmark and London for 3 weeks of training. And in this period, the parent company had a chat with the Indian partner, told them in no uncertain terms that this casual attitude would not work. By the time Vineet returned to India, things had changed.

He was now running the show but there were a host of problems: sales data did not tally, money data did not tally, salaries were in a mess. No one even carried a business card!

It would be natural to think, *yeh main kahaan phans gaya*. What gave Vineet some hope was Bombay Rayon—it was a company with a topline of ₹3,000 crores. That meant Prashant Agarwal knew how to do business. But you can’t succeed in retail, if you think like a manufacturer.

“I sat down with Prashant and said, ‘We need to do things differently here’.”

The first thing Vineet did was formulate a business plan for the next 3 years. The target he set was ₹100 crores. And it would require substantial investment.

“No problem,” said Prashant. “We will do it.”

The first priority was hiring good professionals. Here, there was a lot of discussion and debate. “Do we need so many employees?” Prashant would ask.

And though they had completely different views on almost everything, eventually Vineet was able to convince him.

“The good thing about Prashant was that he didn’t want to create another Bombay Rayon, he allowed me to create a professional organisation.”

But even though Bestseller India offered market salaries, it wasn’t easy to hire people back then. There was no fancy office, just 4 stores in the whole country. And the brands were not well known. It was like convincing folks to join a start-up, based on your past credentials. And what you planned to do in future!

Zara was entering India at the same time as Vero Moda. So everyone was a bit on edge.

15 days before the launch—the 8th of May—Prashant declared, “This should be the

biggest launch in the city. Everyone must know, Vero Moda has arrived!"

> *Brands are built by storytelling, not just by your products or having a retail store. It is a story which you need to sell.*

In the next 5–7 days, Vineet and his newly recruited team put together an ambitious campaign, with the help of an event agency.

"The idea came from me. We took over all the radio channels of Mumbai for what we called the 'biggest, on-air fashion party'."

All day, there was lots of peppy music—no other ads, only Vero Moda.

But the real coup was the fashion show, where Vero Moda got 9 celebrities to walk the ramp for the brand. That too, inside Palladium, where such events are a strict no-no. They were able to pull the right strings and get permission… But having 9 celebrities comes with its own complications.

> *Every store has a poster which has the CEO's email id and mobile number. It's part of the policy manual, to be accessible to all.*

"The biggest problem with having Indian celebrities in fashion shows is that you can't have 2 of them walk the ramp together. Everyone wants to be the showstopper!"

Somehow, the team pulled it off. And by the end of the opening day, the Palladium store had racked up a stupendous sale of ₹8 lakh. By the end of the month, they hit a crore in sales.

And that gave Vineet confidence—our pricing and product strategy is right!

He firmly believed that Vero Moda should be a high-fashion, high-volume brand. T-shirts were ₹799–999, tops were ₹1,299–1,999. That was a 'sweet spot' for the customer.

At that price, the company did not make good margins. This was because all merchandise was imported and carried a duty of 50%.

But you can't launch a brand at a higher price and bring it down later. If you are selling 'value', you must do it from day 1.

"The customer's mind cannot be changed after 6 months, 1 year, 2 years…"

So in the initial period, Vineet was personally involved in pricing each and every garment. Using not just cost but a perception of 'what the customer is willing to pay' for it.

"What I was sure about is that the faster we grow, the faster we can source from India. And then our margins will automatically go up to 65–70%."

In October 2010, Vero Moda launched an 18,000 sq ft store in Saket, replicating elements of the Palladium launch. The store racked up an astounding ₹3 crores in the first month.

All eyes were now on Linking Road, which was meant to be a flagship store and still a work in progress. In fact, the project kept getting delayed for one reason or another.

"Everybody in Denmark wanted to come for the Linking Road store opening and every time we were changing dates… we were under a lot of pressure."

One fine day, it was decided to just 'fix a date' and work backwards. The store had to be up and running in 49 days and the building was not even fully constructed!

But open it did. And once again, with a much-talked about campaign which was not about the clothes. Vero Moda announced a 'Model Hunt', where walk-in auditions were held with celebrity judges. And real customers got a chance to walk the ramp. The campaign went on to win several awards.

"You see, we are not just selling clothes, we are selling a story…"

And it is equally important to sell that story to the people who work for you.

When the team went to Goa to celebrate the success of the Linking Road store, Vineet decided to use the time not only to have fun, but also do some thinking. He brought in a trainer and in that 3 days of sun and sand, the Bestseller India team put together a vision and mission statement.

"We decided to really 'think big' and set a goal of ₹1,000 crores by the end of 2015."

That was a tall order. In December 2010, the company had 40 employees and a turnover of ₹46 crores. *Magar jahaan chah hai, wahaan raah hai*.

As important as financial goals, was the discussion on 'what do we stand for', 'what should our culture be'. These became guiding principles for years to come.

Over the next 4 years, Bestseller India grew at a frenetic pace. Despite not following the practice of appointing franchisees. Instead, it took the harder route of setting up company-owned retail stores. This took significant investments from Bombay Rayon and the parent company in Denmark.

"We wanted greater control… and were able to create a better experience for customers."

One of the differentiators in Bestseller stores has been customer service. Walk into a Vero Moda, Only or Jack & Jones and you will be greeted by a consultant, who will help you to try and buy. This, of course, is not the norm in Europe, where staff cost is too high. But it's a 'local touch' that has worked well in India.

The team now sat in a fancy office right above the Linking Road store where, every Tuesday, Prashant would drop in. And sit with Vineet to review everything—from what agreements were being signed to locations of stores. These discussions would usually go on till 4 in the morning.

"Sometimes, he would challenge us, why can't we expand more.… When his thoughts were too radical, I would say, this is not practical!"

When 2 people sing different tunes, it can be a cacophony. Or a jugalbandi. In this case, the entrepreneur and the professional were able to strike that rapport.

By 2013, Bestseller India was manufacturing garments in India and customising them. Keeping in mind Indian tastes and preferences. For example, while Europe is a 'black, blue and grey' kind of market, Indian consumers love bright colours. And they don't want deep necks or big armholes.

"We pick a lot of styles but change the fabric, make it more suitable for our summer heat."

With all this action and reaction, came terrific customer traction. By the end of 2015, Bestseller India had achieved sales of ₹997 crores with 100-plus stores and 2,000 employees.

The company was cash-profitable, the brands were well-known and the smartest graduates from NIFT were clamouring to join the company.

> *It might be the toughest job in the world but if you are enjoying what you do, it won't get to you.*

A vision, a mission, a dream kept alive… until it came true! But behind the scenes of

every grand success are many small failures.

Out of every 10 stores opened, 2 would have to be shut down. This could be due to the location, or the mall, or just not enough customers.

"And I think, that is very important, to kill that long tail fast. Not prolong it."

Because struggler units eat into the energy of the organisation. In fact, it's a vicious circle. When a store is not performing, people lose motivation and it balloons into a bigger failure. For this reason, Bestseller India has a project team, whose only job is to look into such stores and how to turn them around. The effort pays off, 50% of the time.

You win some, you lose some, and sometimes, you just amicably part ways. In 2015, Vero Moda took over the entire business from its partner, Bombay Rayon.

However, even as a wholly owned subsidiary, the Indian business was given the freedom, to chart a distinct path.

"Disconnect from Denmark as much as possible," was what owner Anders Povlsen advised. This approach had already worked wonders for Bestseller in China.

One area where India took leadership was in tech. When the company hit ₹100 crores in revenue, it invested heavily in SAP. What's more, in the touchy-feely world of fashion, where buyers use their gut to predict trends, Vineet Gautam decided to incorporate machine learning and artificial intelligence.

"Our AI tool, developed in India, looks at what's happening globally and at social media trends…"

> *To see people who joined you when they were young become confident and successful… that's a really great feeling!*

Styles predicted by the tool sell 10% more than those picked by human experts.

At the same time, tech is making life easier for employees. They can simply log into an app and submit expenses, get reimbursements, apply for leave and so on.

If tech is Vineet's first love, 'people issues' come a close second. In 2019, that means dealing with 3,000 people, average age 26. How does one keep such a workforce motivated?

One part of it is creating a culture where you are expected to perform. But not be afraid of making mistakes. The second, is looking beyond retail, to implement best practices. The policy of 6 months paid maternity leave, for example, was a reality at Bestseller India, much before the government made it mandatory.

"I definitely want to see 50% women workforce in our office. Right now it is 38%."

Apart from the 'science' of HR, there is what can only be called 'the personal touch'. 85% of the employees are front-end staff, so Vineet makes it a point to visit stores often. There's also an incentive program called a 'Rock On' party which is held in 12 cities, twice a year, where the CEO holds an open house.

In addition, there's an annual outbound event which is curated by Vineet.

While Bestseller India continues to grow its turnover, profit remains elusive. This is because of the length of the investment cycle. A store takes 3–4 years to break even, and meanwhile, one needs to invest in infrastructure, warehousing, IT and so on. The parent company, with an annual turnover of 3.15 billion euros, is up to this challenge.

"Our owner believes that retail needs long gestation and when you have pressures of listing, you take wrong decisions…"

That doesn't mean the company is low in ambition. The plan is to double turnover in the next 3 years. And doing that means thinking and operating in new ways.

Over the last 1 year, Bestseller has opened over 20 franchise stores in smaller towns and is looking to launch a made-in-India brand to target the DMart / Big Bazaar customer.

All this, under the shadow of online discounts which have made life difficult for all retailers.

“Actually, we are very early adopters of the online business. Since we own all our inventory, we decide how much to discount and where….”

Speaking of merchandise, there are clothes and accessories whichever side you turn at the Bestseller India headquarters, in Mumbai’s Andheri East. There are multiple floors, each floor houses one brand and you can almost feel the *hum* of fashion as busy young men and women huddle over their desks.

On a typical day, Vineet Gautam enters the office at 10 am, with the first half hour for some informal chit-chat. From 10.30 am, it’s time for meetings and more meetings.

While the job involves a lot of travel—2–3 days a week is par for the course—Tuesdays are sacrosanct. That is the day reserved for the weekly review with all HODs and key sales managers. Some of whom join on video conference, from various regions. The meeting generally takes 4–4.5 hours and goes into all aspects of the business in great detail.

“This helps take quick decisions… which is really important. Because the fashion business is all about speed.”

It’s about constantly keeping an ear to the ground and so, each week, Vineet meets up with various partners such as shop-in-shops, online portals or mall owners. He’s also open to meeting technology experts and interesting start-ups who reach out via LinkedIn. Because you never know who you can learn from.

For a CEO’s job is to think ahead, plan ahead, anticipate the next bend in the river…

“At any given time there are several ‘new projects’ in the pipeline and these are also run by my office.”

It’s time to shut shop between 7–8 pm and head home, which means an hour or more in killer traffic. Post-dinner, watching TV sports (tennis, F1, cricket) is how Vineet likes to unwind. The one thing he truly cherishes is a good night’s sleep—at least 7–8 hours of it.

“I’m not a very early riser,” he laughs. “No yoga or meditation for me. Though I wish I could find the time to play some sports!”

As for work-life balance, that’s never easy in the Screen Age. Vineet is very accessible on email and WhatsApp (he tends to clear his inbox every one hour). But on weekends he does manage to find time to relax and sometimes head out for a long drive with his wife and dog Coco (a 10-year-old cocker spaniel)

While some know exactly where they want to go, others go where the road takes them.

Zindagi ek safar hai suhana,
yahan kal kya ho kisne jaana…
Mushkilon se bhi mat ghabrana,
yahan kal kya ho… bring it on!

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

Don’t shy away from hard work, I think that’s required, there is no short-cut to success.

Biggest thing I see people struggling with today is, they don’t bring passion. You could be passionate about anything—work around that, suddenly you will find motivation.

You won’t need to look for motivation from outside.

Sometimes you may feel ‘I have missed out’ or ‘My peers have gone ahead’. But everyone has their own pace, own journey, you will get where you are supposed to.

But while you are chasing success, do not become too full of yourself. As a manager you are constantly meeting people, it is important to be humble. If you treat people well, they will deliver for you.

Kabhi decisions galat bhi honge, luck ka bhi role hoga but sabse important hai ek team jo aap mein believe kare, jo aapke liye khadi ho sake aur aapke passion ke saath chal sake…

Agar aap yeh kar payenge toh jo chahein achieve kar sakenge.

Section 2
DRISHTI

The older a company is, the more stable and set in its ways. Then comes a leader who sparks the ambition of his people. Releasing hidden potential to see and do things like never before.

NITIN PARANJPE

Unilever

Joining HUL as a management trainee and rising to CEO at age 46, Nitin Paranjpe had what you might call a ‘dream run’. Until, a few months after he took over the reins, there was a global recession. This is the story of how Nitin found a way to grow the business—despite the external environment—by looking inward. Changing the mindset, the mood and the aspirations of people.

THAT THING YOU DO

Nitin Paranjpe is a ‘nice guy’. But he isn’t one of those ‘nice guys who finish last’.

Starting his career with Hindustan Unilever (HUL) in 1987, Nitin was made CEO in the year 2008. Becoming the youngest ever Chief Executive Officer at the venerable Anglo-Dutch multinational.

Makers of Lifebuoy, Liril, Lux and Surf—which have been a part of our lives for so long, that most us believe *yeh toh Indian company hai*.

So how does one go from management trainee to Board of Directors in 21 short years? Is it about being a ‘star performer’ from Day 1 to Infinity?

As I listened to Nitin, I realised, *aisa nahin hai*. There is potential in each of us, to rise and to shine. Yet some of us do, and some of us don’t.

Along the way, we get tired, frustrated and bored.

I think what sets Nitin apart is his DNA as a sportsman. When you play a cricket match, you give it everything you have. Some days you win, some days you lose.

You shake hands with your opponent and say, “Next time, I will try harder.”

You don’t take it personally.

You follow the rules of the game. And you never forget that it is a game.

It seems to me that Nitin faced every challenge in his career as if he were at the crease. At that moment, all that matters is hitting the next ball. And the next, and the next.

Karte karte century ho gayi. Man of the match ban gaye.

But a great batsman knows—this victory is today’s victory. Tomorrow I must face the ball again. There is anticipation, there is thrill. *Dhadakta hua dil*.

This is the game of life.

Nitin Paranjpe was born in Pune but grew up mostly in Mumbai.

"My father was an IAS officer—a very honest and upright man. He has shaped so much of who I am."

As a young boy, Nitin recalls an incident when he had just come home from school at around 2 pm and someone rang the doorbell. The caller thrust a box of mithai and a Raymond's trouser piece into his hands. When Pappa returned that evening and heard about this, he gave Nitin a lashing like he had never got before in his life.

"I never understood it then… but some of these things had a deep impact on me."

While Mr Paranjpe stood for work ethic and discipline, Mrs Paranjpe played an equally important role in shaping Nitin. She was a housewife for many years, but when the kids were in school, she decided to go back to college for further studies. At the age of 45, she began teaching at Nirmala Niketan. Being from Marathi medium, it wasn't easy for her.

But her attitude was, "If I don't try, I will never learn."

Mrs Paranjpe's teaching work didn't end in college. She took the child of the domestic help under her wing.[1] Nitin could not understand why his mother wanted to 'waste her time'.

"Aai, what difference will it make?"

"Nitin, it doesn't matter. If I can teach one, it's better than none."

"I observed Aai always wanting to do the right thing, taking accountability, and not pointing fingers at anyone else!"

Nitin attended St Xavier's Boys Academy in Marine Lines, where he was known as an all-rounder. A reasonably good student, but the thing that truly excited him was sports. Nitin was captain of the cricket team as well as a state-level table tennis player. So he travelled around the country, playing in different tournaments.

As a sportsman, you win some, you lose some. Nobody likes to lose, but Nitin was not the sort who would brood, or feel devastated. "I would go home and write in my diary—this is what I did, this is what my opponent did. How can I change, what can I do better next time?"

What next, after Class 10, was also the question. With a decent mark of 79% in the SSC Board exam, Nitin opted for Science at Jai Hind College. IAS did not hold any fascination for Nitin; his heart was set on IIT. At this point, he had to make a tough choice. It was impossible to prepare for engineering entrance exams as well as give the same amount of time to sports.

> *If you want to push people, you should be willing to push yourself harder.*

"I decided to drop cricket—which was all-consuming—and only play table tennis."

Despite his best efforts, Nitin got a poor rank in JEE (1336). What's more, during the IIT medical, Nitin discovered he was colour blind. Hence, he could not opt for any stream in engineering, only a Physics or Chemistry course. So he decided to opt for College of Engineering, Pune (COEP), where rules were not so stringent. They only asked for a certificate saying 'colour blindness will not interfere with my studies'.

Again, Nitin was a good student but never the topper. He continued to play TT, mostly

for fun. And at the end of the course, he got placed with Larsen & Toubro.

"It was my dream job.… I was very excited to work at L & T. But as I went through my first year, it wasn't what I thought it would be."

With no meaningful work given to him, Nitin spent much of his time reading manuals. Bored and disillusioned, he decided to write CAT and other management entrance exams. Didn't make it to any of the IIMs but got into Jamnalal Bajaj Institute, and joined. To his own surprise, for the first time ever, Nitin topped the MBA class.

"Maybe, because relatively I was a big fish in a small pond.… I might never have done that well if I was in those more premier institutes!"

Well, the big fish swam his way into a very big, very coveted pond called Hindustan Lever (HUL). It was not the young MBA's 'first choice'. Initially, Nitin was attracted to TAS (Tata Administrative Services) and his plan was to join Tata Motors or Tata Steel, making use of both, engineering and management degrees.

But a summer training experience at HUL changed the course of his life. Nitin was sent to a far-flung area, deep in Vidarbha, to work on rural distribution of brands. This meant riding the 'long van', which would be on the rough road for a full 2 days, before returning to a town such as Nanded. So you had to spend 1 night in an obscure village, in some sort of lodge.

"I am not a fussy person, but the only place available was so smelly, so dirty… I thought it was better to sleep in the van."

Now the driver and salesman had already occupied the front, so the only place left was in the back, where the stocks were piled up. But the smell of carbolic from tons of Lifebuoy soap was unbearable. So Nitin did the next best thing—he slept on the footpath. But the work was fascinating and at the end of it, Nitin Paranjpe had a 'most wanted' pre-placement offer.

But still, he wanted to give Tata Administrative Services a shot. The TAS screening process included having a meal with the senior management, where you were expected to eat with knife and fork. So Nitin took tutorials on table manners from a good friend, Zal Cooper, who was a Parsi. And got selected by TAS. But now came the dilemma: which company to join?

"I guess, having been a summer trainee there and seeing it at close quarters finally swung the decision."

The Bajaj graduate joined the HUL management trainee program, along with about 18 other fresh MBAs from across the country. All of whom believed that they 'belonged' at this prestigious company. That selection was a natural outcome of their talent and even better things were to come. Whereas Nitin simply felt a sense of accomplishment.

"My only thought was I shouldn't do anything that results in the company feeling they made a mistake!"

So he worked hard, and while some might say selling detergent is 'boring', Nitin enjoyed his work. During the training period, all HUL managers are sent to a place called Etah in western Uttar Pradesh, to experience 'real India'. But even that did not prepare Nitin for his first posting in eastern UP, where he spent the first 3 years of his career.

Here was a 24-year-old 'Area Sales Manager', leading a team of 10 salesmen, some of them twice his age. You have a boss in Delhi, but on a day-to-day basis it's you who is in charge. You whom they look up to. Monday morning to Friday evening you are on the road. Travelling long hours, talking to people, leading by example.

"The first thing I learnt is that you may be the boss, but if you don't understand the job being done by the front-end person, you don't have their respect."

Not only should you understand it, you should be good enough to do it.

"And, never ever ask anyone to do something that you are not willing to do yourself."

In those early years, Nitin recalls sticking posters onto walls with lei (desi gum-paste).

Standing on top of a desk, or ladder, to nail things in. Standing in stores until the merchandising was perfect.

But at the same time, thinking of new ways to solve old problems. Like how to expand distribution, reach new customers. Especially those who lived in villages that were inaccessible by road.

Nitin observed that these folks travelled up to the main highway by bullock cart, to get their supply of diesel and kerosene. So he tied up with Radha Kishan Bimal Kumar, a local firm which ran these routes in eastern UP. The idea being to sell Lifebuoy and Lux to the same customers, along with essentials.

> *Because I was in a small brand, the canvas was large and there were few people. If I was doing something well, the credit was all mine.*

"I actually sat on top of these tankers, travelled to various places, to see what is happening and check whether this concept can work!" It did work, although there were challenges. So the model was never replicated widely.

The badlands also made the young MBA worldly-wise. Cheques can bounce and so can demand drafts! So you have to be careful about whom you trust, but essentially, trade is about building relationships.

Nitin was thrilled to be the first sales manager among all trainees to move to brand management. Although he was assigned to the only one vacant, the smallest brand in the company: Vim. A few months later, when other trainees moved into brand, they got to work with Surf or Lifebuoy. And now, Nitin was no longer feeling that good.

The last straw was when an outsider was brought in to take charge of the Wheel brand. Nitin went up to his boss and said, "Do you think I can't handle that? Is that why I'm still on a smaller brand?"

Boss replied, "How much you learn, grow and contribute has nothing to do with the turnover of the brand. See what a small brand offers."

A part of him was not convinced but Nitin held his boss in very high esteem. If he is saying this, it just might be true.… Indeed, with a positive mindset, the whole situation began to look different.

The first joy was that his boss never had enough time to spend on this brand. And thus Nitin got to do things that none of his peers could. If they wanted to make an ad, at least 5 other people would look at it before it got approved. Vim was so small that if Nitin said, "Let's go do this", he simply got a "Go ahead!"

"The experimentation I could do, the freedom that I had, was just amazing."

Unlike others who kept shuffling their portfolio, looking for 'better opportunities', Nitin remained on the same brand for a full 5 years. And in that time, he tried out many news ideas, launched new products. Some of these worked, some didn't. The big failure was Vim liquid. Nitin was absolutely convinced there was a market for it; the only barrier was the cost.

> *A few things I tried with great belief and great passion just didn't work in the marketplace… and I learnt a lot from that.*

Now the active ingredient in a liquid cleaner comprises 10–15% of the volume, the rest is just water. So Nitin had a brilliant idea: why don't we sell the concentrate in a small sachet for ₹5. People can dilute the concentrate at home, to make 1 litre. With such attractive economics, Nitin was pretty sure the market should explode. But… it just didn't take off!

"We even gave an empty 1 litre bottle of Vim, to get people into the habit, but nothing worked."

Much later, Nitin realised the real problem was not with the customer but with the organisation itself.

At the time, HUL had a system which rewarded people on the basis of tonnage sold. Selling 20 ml was not going to help any salesman reach his target, so there was no enthusiasm for it.

The second aspect was that while the product was really good, when diluted, the viscosity was water-like. So the customer was not quite convinced it would be effective.

And lastly, the company gave up too soon. Good ideas take time—you need to believe, you need to persevere.

At the same time, another product launch was a runaway success. In the '90s, the dishwash market was entirely in the form of powder. And Vim powder was a very good product but wasn't selling that much, because people felt 'this is expensive'. The ads tried to convey that you need to use much less and therefore it's great value, but it didn't work. Nitin set out to find out—why?

"When I did consumer visits, I realised the power of observation and not just data which comes across to you. The power of really talking to people yourself."

The housewives he met were smart, they knew Vim powder was better. Yet they bought the cheaper product. The reason was simple.

"I don't do the dishes myself. I give it to the maid."

The maid had no motivation to use the right amount of powder. The lady of the house thought okay, then let her waste the cheap powder.

The way to solve this problem was not to educate the customer but to create a format where you *cannot* have wastage. And that format, Nitin believed, was a 'bar'. But formulating such a product was tough. After several failed attempts, Nitin's boss, Vindi Banga, said, "We have tested this to death, let's bury it."

But there was one guy in R & D who requested 'one more try'. And Nitin went back to Vindi Banga with that request. He agreed, but this would be the absolutely last attempt. This time, it worked brilliantly! And the rest, as they say, is history. The Vim bar launched in 1994 was quickly adopted by consumers, completely restructuring the market.

One small incident during this period left a lasting impression on the young manager.

As he was walking down the corridor, he crossed paths with his boss, who remarked, "Nitin, the last proposal you sent me was short of your usually high standards."

The line shook Nitin to the core. It was the most powerful feedback he ever got.

"That day I said to myself, every time I produce something, it must be something I am proud of."

For a name is like an 'ISI' mark. If you have a chalta hai attitude, you do chalta hai work. But if you really value yourself and what you stand for, you deliver more than what is expected.

You become inward driven, develop a personal work ethic. And that is its own reward.

"I've also been fortunate that I had a set of bosses who saw something in me and had the courage to bet on me… giving me roles which frankly scared me!"

One day his boss called Nitin and casually asked, "What would you like to do next?"

Nitin said, "What I would really like to do… or what I can realistically expect to do, at my level?"

Boss replied, “What you would *like* to do.”

With no thoughts of hierarchy, seniority, experience, Nitin shared his dream job.

“I would like to be Regional Manager.”

A Regional Manager is the head of Sales Operations and Commercial Operations for a region. Such a role would be like getting a ‘double promotion’. Well, boss did not react and that, was that.

A month later, Vindi Banga called, on his way to the airport. He said, “Nitin, if you recollect what we had spoken of. We’d like you to go to the Chennai branch as Branch Manager.”

As it sank in, Nitin experienced shock, awe and then euphoria. But he also couldn’t sleep that night.

“Do I deserve it… will I be able to perform?”

The demons of self-doubt remained, as Nitin took up his new position. The first few months were an accelerated form of learning. At 33, he was handling the largest branch in the country. The other regional managers had at least 4–5 years more experience. 6 months into the job, Nitin was getting a grip on things, feeling confident, when all hell broke loose.

> *It was not about falling in my boss’s eyes, I was falling in my own eyes in terms of the perception that I had of myself.*

The traders in the state of Kerala decided to boycott HUL products. This was a pressure tactic, to make the company increase margins. The boycott was expected to fizzle out in a couple of weeks. But the traders remained adamant. And also united. Nitin was feeling the heat and did not know what to do. Should he succumb to their demands, or continue losing business?

A month into the crisis, Chairman Keki Dadiseth called him and said, “Nitin, do the right thing. If it means we have to walk out of the state, we will.”

The team that plays together, stays together; Regional Manager ‘at work’

That one sentence was extremely powerful. It’s one thing to talk about values but quite another to *live up* to them. Keki Dadiseth continued to call his young manager every week, with moral support.

Nitin was also called to Mumbai, to a Board meeting. Naturally, he was feeling nervous.

The Chairman said, “Nitin, we have called you, not because we doubt you but to reinforce to you and tell you, in front of everyone here, that you are the ‘man in the spot’. You will take the decisions.”

The Chairman placed his trust on Nitin’s young shoulders, empowered him to act.

“Everyone is there to help you and support you. But no one here will double guess you…”

In that period, Nitin spent most of his time in courts of law, meeting ministers and the police. Things started getting rough: a couple of sales guys were abducted, police escort became necessary. Yet, people stuck with the company, they continued working. That was the strength of the organisation and the belief employees had in it.

A stage came when Nitin realised there was only one way to break the deadlock. The company issued ads in newspapers, rented space in key cities and opened its own stores, with police protection. Nitin was at the very first outlet, standing behind the counter. Around the same time, an MRTP (Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices) order was issued, in favour of HUL.

The traders had no choice but to call off the boycott. But at this point, Keki Dadiseth said something which was a game changer.

“Let us not feel proud,” he said. “Nobody has won, both sides have lost.”

After all, traders are partners of the company. If they feel humiliated, they will only carry a grudge. The task given by the Chairman was, over the next 6 months, ‘win their hearts’.

In his 3 years as Branch Manager, Nitin grew both personally and professionally. It was then time to move on, and this time, it was a very unconventional role. ‘Project Millennium’ was an internal think tank constituted by Unilever to be ‘future ready’. A small team was to travel the world, meet varied sets of people and advise what new businesses the company should enter.

Nitin visited companies like Dell, J & J and also worked closely with McKinsey.

“It was a fabulous experience in terms of learning and growing in that period.”

This was followed by a 1-year stint, as Executive Assistant to the Chairman of Unilever, Myle Fitzgerald. When Nitin returned to India in 2001, he was a rising star in the company. The last 14 years had been challenging but good years. He had never missed a target, always beaten the odds. So when he was asked to take over a tough category, he was optimistic. ‘I will fix it’.

But the years 2002 and 2003 were a humbling experience. Nitin was unable to meet any of the goals he’d committed to. The category was laundry and there were many factors: economic slowdown, new competitors, changing India. As category head, Nitin was trying every strategy, every trick in the book. But it wasn’t yielding results.

“I would wake up at 4 o’clock in the morning, simply not knowing what else I could do. Those few months were traumatic… it was the first time I had experienced a real failure.”

> *I never asked my boss when is my next promotion, why am I not getting it, etc. If I deserve it, it will come to me.*

In hindsight, it was good. Because failure has many more lessons to teach than success. It teaches you resilience. It makes you humble. You realise that tough times require one to

operate differently.

"Some problems need a structural solution, I should have been bolder, acted more quickly."

The senior management had been taking note. At the end of 2003, Nitin's boss called him in for a difficult conversation. At HUL, there is this concept of being a 'lister', i.e. an individual with high potential, on the fast track. Nitin had been a lister for quite some time. 1 bad year was okay, but 2 years in a row and you're facing the moment of truth.

"Nitin, your listing status is being dropped," was the decision of the powers-that-be.

It had been a difficult period for the company as a whole. Nitin could have defended himself, saying everyone is missing their targets. Instead, he agreed with his boss.

"You are absolutely right. I don't deserve to be a lister anymore." And strangely enough, it didn't really bother Nitin.

As a trainee, he'd looked up to the head of sales for detergents and thought, "If I make it to that level, I would be enormously successful. Anything beyond that would be a bonus."

Well, as it happened, there were bigger things in store. 2004 was a good year and 2005, even better. Nitin was reinstated as a lister and, in 2006, became head of the home and personal care business (the largest division of the company). And joined the management committee, an apex body at HUL. In 2007, he was invited to join the Board of Directors.

On 27 February 2008, late in the evening, Nitin got a call from the HUL company secretary.

"We'd like you to be in the office at 8.30 am tomorrow," he said. Nitin was in Patna on a market visit, there were limited flight options. The earliest he could reach the office was 10 o'clock. When he explained his predicament, the company secretary said something strange.

"Nitin, I can't say anymore but make the effort, find a way to get here, it will be worth your while."

The only way out was to first go to Delhi and then take an Air India flight at an absurd hour.

"I did all that… still not knowing what the hell was the urgency."

When he arrived at the Backbay Reclamation office of Hindustan Unilever at 8.30 am, there was a buzz in the air. Preparations being made, for an important announcement.

'Nitin Paranjpe, you have been appointed as Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of HUL'.

It was a bolt from the blue. Doug Baillie had been CEO for just 2 years; a change was completely unexpected.

"I could barely believe my ears…!"

This was well beyond his wildest dreams, not something aimed for or planned for. Of course, it felt great to be the youngest-ever CEO at Hindustan Unilever. But the honeymoon lasted less than 6 months. In September 2008, Lehman Brothers collapsed and the effects of the global financial crisis hit India. The year 2009 was a nightmare. HUL performance stalled, the share price tanked.

"Those were the most miserable 9 months… once again I had sleepless nights."

Though Nitin had some experience of going through bad times, this time, the stakes were much, much bigger. The leadership team was struggling with the question: what do we do. How do we get back on track? But not once did anyone entertain the idea of taking shortcuts. *Let's do it, but let's do it right*. And it has to be something different because more of the same is not going to work. *But how?*

Back in the year 1999, Nitin had met the late Prof C K Prahalad as part of the Millennium project. The good professor asked, "What do you think HUL needs to become an even greater organisation?"

Nitin replied, "We should become more entrepreneurial."

"Okay," said Dr Prahalad. "Tell me, what is the difference between a manager and an entrepreneur?"

Nitin rolled out the obvious stuff: risk-taking, ambition, innovation. The professor shook his head. He went up to the blackboard and wrote two alphabets: A and R, A and R.

In the first line he wrote: A >> R

In the second line he wrote A <= R

What was this mysterious formula… it made no sense to Nitin.

Dr Prahalad then wrote the word 'entrepreneur' next to A >> R. And the word 'manager' next to A <= R.

"A stands for aspiration or ambition and R for resource," said the professor.

The only difference between an entrepreneur and a manager is the mindset.

Managers manage resources, that's what they have been taught, so a manager will have A = R. You give me a little more budget, I'll do more, you reduce my budget, reduce my target. That's the conversation that happens when managers talk about what it takes to get results. But for an entrepreneur, the ambition and aspiration have no correlation to the resources.

Set goals with your heart, find ways to get there with you head, don't do it the other way round.

A guy with barely a penny in his pocket would be dreaming of 'changing the world'.

"It is this mismatch between ambition and resource which causes him to do things differently," said Dr Prahalad.

This conversation impacted Nitin deeply, and at this time of crisis, he was struck by a thought. How can an organisation like HUL consciously create A >> R? How do you raise the bar, set audacious new goals? Most people are happy living in their comfort zone, they resist change. But desperate times call for desperate measures…

Thus began the first experiment of real boldness, to tackle the crisis of 2009. The route Nitin chose was a dramatic leap forward, in distribution. At the time, HUL was already the market leader with close to 1 million points of sale across the country. With annual growth of 10 to 15,000 outlets every year—maintaining its number 1 position in the industry.

"Our people were feeling good about it and that's where the problem was. Yes, we were ahead of everyone else but that gap was narrowing."

When you are the market leader, you are the 'target' everyone else is chasing. And over time your competitive advantage gets eroded. So how do you break out of this complacency?

By using the formula A >> R. Between 2005 and 2009, HUL added 50,000 retail outlets. In 2009, Nitin Paranjpe declared, "Our goal is to add 500,000 in the next 1 year."

There was a stunned silence.

"It sounded stupid then and it sounds stupid now… but later, I realised the value of this. It took the conversation, the thinking, into a completely different space."

Now, had the goal been 30,000 new outlets, the team would have negotiated—'Boss, we've never done more than 15,000 a year, stretch kar ke we can manage 20,000'.

However, if you start with 5 lakh—what do you negotiate down to? 4 lakh is just as impossible…

The one universal truth is that each one of us

wants to be a hero. We have to find and show people ways in which they can be heroes.

Nitin realised that people negotiate for lower goals because of just one reason: fear of failure. If, by some magic wand, you can eliminate that fear, human beings are capable. Of anything they imagine!

In the world of muggles and management gurus, what 'magic wand' really means is some form of cultural or leadership intervention. A larger vision, a purpose, which is audacious and energising.

"Let's go for it and build pride back in this organisation!"

The magic would work on one condition: Do not doubt the idea, do not doubt yourself. Instead, keep visualising the outcome. What it would look like, what it would feel like.

"Basically what I was asking them to do is keep the rational mind aside and embrace the goal from the heart. Because the mind will use its logic and reason to hold you back…"

To the credit of the organisation, they didn't pooh-pooh these radical thoughts. Or shake their heads and say, 'Get real!' Instead, the rank and file *accepted* the idea, became obsessed with it. The same team, the same resources—but people found completely new ways of doing things. Discovering, in the process, the joy of being a pioneer.

One problem HUL had been grappling with—for years—was how to reach the remotest of villages. Where the cost of reaching the product was higher than the size of the business itself.

Now, unfettered by 'what has been done before', the team came up with a bold new plan.

'Let us partner with a company who will pay us, to distribute *their* product'.

A perfect (and non-competing) partner was found in Tata Docomo, which paid HUL a massive distribution fee to take its sim cards into rural India. And it worked brilliantly, for both companies.

This is what it means to think and act like an entrepreneur.

At this point I ask Nitin, "When you began this exercise, did *you* believe the goal would be met?"

He replied, "The actual number was not the point. Even if we didn't achieve 500,000 but 200,000, we would all be heroes."

When you set an audacious goal, 9 out of 10 times that goal will not be met. But you still end up doing not marginally better but several times better than your original set-point.

The one who wields the wand must, however, have a great deal of trust and confidence in the team. His job, first and foremost, is to be a cheerleader.

"If all you do is make a person feel inadequate and lousy about himself or herself, is there any chance they will get there… not a chance!"

The best chance of magic happening is when people feel good about themselves. But not so good that they sit back and relax.

"As we reviewed the progress every other month, I was amazed. It was beyond belief and I said so. Everyone was a hero and I would make them feel like one."

At the same time, Nitin would let them know, the game is not over, as yet…

At the end of 2010, HUL had added 500,000 new outlets. Everyone thought, okay, the job is done, now we will consolidate.

Meanwhile, Nitin was thinking, what next, we can't stop here! But he didn't convey his ambition through a PowerPoint presentation. Just casually slipped it into a conversation.

"You know… I was thinking… what would happen if we get another 500,000 next year!"

No analysis, no discussion—let the team soak it in. No one feels pushed, or threatened. Neither is there any outright excitement. But a seed has been planted.

"By the time we actually made the announcement, there was no shock. Half the team had already internalised the idea, made it their own."

There's a small voice within that says, 'I am capable of doing more. I want to do more'.

Koi aapko push nahin kar raha, aap apni marzi se, apni khushi se kaam kar rahe ho. Haan ji!

The second target of 500,000 was reached at the end of 2010-11. The formula A >> R actually worked!

Nitin shrugs. "What we have tried to do was create the conditions that allowed people to flourish. And I must say that we did not succeed with everyone. But we certainly moved the needle!"

It was also time to move the needle in other areas. One of the shifts senior management was grappling with was the rise of social media. Which was completely different from television. It was time to 'go back to school'. As a first step, the 100 senior-most managers in the company were trained by Google. Over time, every HUL employee was to be 'digitally certified'.

"Starting with me," laughs Nitin. "I had no idea how to write on someone's wall. Or how to tweet."

So the CEO got a 25-year-old chap to show him the ropes. As part of this reverse mentoring, Nitin attended workshops conducted by young managers, did homework and assignments! As CEO he also started the practice of a weekly lunch with management trainees, where each one was free to speak their mind.

"We are a young country, so it's important to understand how young Indians think!"

> *It's the law of numbers (and meritocracy). Someone younger will one day get ahead of you… be prepared for it.*

Sitting in an air-conditioned office, it's easy to become 'far removed' from the man on the street. This was the genesis of 'Mission Bushfire', where every employee of the company, from top to bottom, spends an entire day in the marketplace. Going to stores, meeting retailers and customers. This one intervention not only boosted sales, it made the company more customer-centric.

"We also realised that aspirations have changed, so must we…."

From mass market, HUL decided to go upmarket with some of its iconic brands. Cold cream Ponds forayed into high-end anti-aging cosmetics while Vaseline diversified into men's grooming products.

The result of all these many efforts and initiatives was clearly reflected in the company's bottom-line. HUL's revenues grew consistently, from ₹17, 764 crores in 2009-10, to ₹26,000 crores in 2012-13. What Nitin Paranjpe is most proud of is doing business, with good, old-fashioned values. HUL has never been focused on 'shareholder wealth maximisation'.

"That's not the purpose, that's the outcome of good business!"

Today, society's trust in business leaders is at an all-time low. That's because we see these leaders acting in a self-serving manner. Nitin believes that the model of leadership itself is flawed. Look at Enron, or Lehman Brothers—IQ was not enough, neither was EQ. What is

needed is a MQ—Moral Quotient. The capacity to take decisions using the yardstick of what is right, what is wrong.

And what of the realm beyond business, beyond office, that which can never be measured by number? Many achievers struggle with this aspect of their lives. This one is an honourable exception. Early in his career, soon after he got married, Nitin and his wife Sharmila met with a serious car accident. He got 40 stitches on his face, while she had over 100. In fact, she lost an eye.

The next 3–4 years were very traumatic for both, Nitin was racked with guilt.

"I cannot tell you how special she is, because in this entire period she never made me feel that I was at the wheel, so I was at fault."

The couple emerged stronger from this ordeal. In the bargain, Nitin realised something that most of us figure out, much too late.

Work is an important part of my life, but only a part. I must value my family, make time for them.

So no matter what the role or designation, it was Nitin who set the rules. He starts his day early, rising at 5 am and is usually back home by 7 pm.

"When my kids were younger, I enjoyed teaching them!"

Nitin enjoyed playing squash, until his knees started troubling him. He then decided to try something new and started running. In fact, he began training for the Standard Chartered Mumbai marathon. This inspired others on the management team to take up running as well. In fact, it became a way for them to bond during the difficult period of 2008-9.

But Nitin's brother wasn't impressed. If you really want to do something 'new', he said, it can't be in the field of sports. Take up something that doesn't come naturally to you… like music.

"Learn how to play an instrument! Just a few songs we can sort of recognise…" joked the family.

Well, Nitin found a teacher, worked at it and did start playing the keyboard. At first, just to prove something; over time, because it was fun. Even performing for family and friends.

"I can play several hundred songs—though not too well—and I truly enjoy it!"

'What next' is a question that we must keep asking, personally and professionally. Indeed, 'nothing is permanent'. In 2012, the HUL Board recommended Nitin Paranjpe's name for a second stint as CEO. However, in October 2013, he was elevated to a global role—as President of Unilever's Home Care business and the Unilever Leadership Executive (the 15-member global top management team).

However, Nitin stayed on in Mumbai for a year, managing an $8.9 billion business using the 'agile working' philosophy—employees can operate from anywhere, 'as long as they get the job done'.

"My son Rohan was already studying in the US but my daughter Aparna was in Class 10. It was a crucial year and we didn't want to dislocate her."

Ultimately, Nitin did move to London. But the experience of leading a global team has been very different from the Indian one. There is no 'physical presence', as such. The managers who report to Nitin are situated all over the world—from Sao Paolo to Istanbul. They are from different cultures, different geographies. So… how does one align everyone to a common goal?

"It is that much harder to lead and to inspire… but the basic principles remain the same."

The numbers speak louder than words. Under Nitin's watch, homecare products registered the fastest rate of growth among all Unilever divisions.[2] And, profitability almost doubled.

This did not go unnoticed. On 1 January 2018, Nitin Paranjpe was elevated to a new and extremely challenging position—as head of the combined foods and refreshments business of Unilever.

Which has been under pressure to grow, to innovate, to ‘show some magic’.

“I have no experience in the area of food… so I am out of my comfort zone. But my belief in people and in the drivers of business remain unchanged!”

Time to put A >> R to the test, once again.

In March 2019, Unilever Plc appointed Nitin Paranjpe as its global Chief Operating Officer (COO). Making him second-in-command at the $57 billion Anglo-Dutch consumer goods company, which has a presence in 190 countries. A remarkable innings, a phenomenal career.

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[1] Mrs Paranjpe went on to set up an NGO called Doorstep School, which has grown to be a large organisation, impacting more than 50,000 kids every year. At 82, she remains actively involved.

[2] The Home Care division grew at 4.9% and posted revenues of £10 billion in FY 2016-17.

To do something beyond designation.
To feel the thrill, the joy of creation.
Each of us has that power within
Now is the time—for you—to begin.

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

The first thing is, it is absolutely crucial to find an organisation whose values resonate with your values. Where you don't feel you are compromising in terms of anything you believe in because the company believes in something else.

The second thing is it is very important for you to have a larger purpose in what you do. One guy thinks he is selling Lifebuoy soap, it's a respectable job but not something that swells your heart with pride, it's merely a job.

Another guy believes that by selling Lifebuoy he is saving lives, reducing the risk of diarrhoea and malnutrition in infants because of the act of washing hands with soap and water 5 times a day (which is an established fact). This guy is on a mission, he brings in that little extra.

That's what makes the difference between an acceptable level of performance and special outcomes.

Don't plan your career. Just do a great job in what you are doing today, give it your 100%.

Too many people are spending a lot of their time thinking about their next job. While the more focused person will deliver better outcomes and *therefore* land the next job.

Do your job well because it's consistent with your work ethic and who you are, because you would hate to produce a shoddy output.

Lastly, don't give too much importance to your IQ. Intellect is important but most people have it and therefore it's not a differentiator. It is the attitude that you bring which will help you get ahead.

Some of us, unfortunately, are a little too intelligent for our own good.

SERVICE ABOVE SELF

A true test of values and of courage

"There was a loud sound… we thought it might be fireworks."

After all, there was a Big Fat Indian Wedding, going on next door.

But Mallika Jagad, the 24-year-old manager in charge of the second-floor banquet room, quickly realised… something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

She bolted the door, pushed some furniture against it and turned off the lights.

"Please get under the table and turn off your cell phones," she instructed.

The top management of Hindustan Unilever—Nitin Paranjpe, Harish Manwani, their wives and colleagues—silently complied. Also present was the outgoing CEO of Unilever Plc Patrick Cescau, in whose honour the farewell dinner was being hosted. And the incoming global CEO Paul Polman.

It was a night nobody in that room will ever forget.

The night of 26/11, when terrorists attacked the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai.

"Everyone talks about how tough it must have been," says Nitin, as he recalls those unreal hours.

His lasting memory is of the remarkable human beings who went way, way beyond the call of duty. Whose action and whose foresight, saved their lives.

"I remember the young girl who was the F&B in-charge, demonstrating such statesman-like behaviour, such composure and commitment to service in that situation."

The terrorists actually came up to their door and tried to open it. It did not budge. They moved on and took hostages from the room next door (who were later shot and killed).

"We could hear the sound of gunfire, of automatic weapons, of grenades being thrown…"

For hours, the group sat huddled, in silence. There was no panic, no despair.

"What is unbelievable is the way the staff continued to look after us… at 2 in the morning, somebody asked for water and it came on a tray."

But at 3 am, there was a crisis. A fire had started outside the room. Someone had the presence of mind to pour water on napkins to try and seal the doors. But it would not be enough.

"I saw why leaders are leaders—and I saw why some of them are such special leaders—when finally we had to break a window and climb out, because smoke started filling the room."

Nitin recalls a 75-year-old former chairman who stood there and kept saying, "Let us be calm."

The more difficult the evening got, the calmer he became. Looking at him was a source of reassurance.

Even at that time of extreme risk and uncertainty, there was no chaos, no desperation. Women went first, guests were next, and then, the rest of the management team.

"And even in that moment between my wife and me we didn't need a

conversation… she knew that I would be the last guy leaving that room."

Call it luck, or destiny, or God's grace. 164 lives were lost in the 26/11 terror attack, of which 31 deaths were at the Taj. But the entire Unilever team escaped, unhurt.

As they stood outside the burning building, Patrick Cescau said to Nitin, "You know what… I am coming back in the spring. We will 'finish that meal'!"

In March 2009, the same set of people gathered, in the same room, with the same menu. But this time Mr Cescau and Mr Polman asked the manager and staff of the Taj to sit down, while they served the meal.

R MUKUNDAN

Tata Chemicals

How do you steer a gigantic ship called ‘We’re doing fine’ in a bold new direction? That was the challenge facing R Mukundan when he took over as Tata Chemicals CEO. Over the last decade, the company has been slowly transforming itself from an industrial chemicals giant to an innovation-led consumer-facing company. Because only if you change, can you grow and prosper.

THE ALCHEMIST

A young man returns from England with an engineering degree and takes up a job with the Tatas. During the course of his work, he meets India's most charismatic national leader.

"I would like to serve my motherland," says the young engineer.

The leader does not invite him to join his party. Instead, he says, "Forget about politics. You can serve your motherland by helping industry to grow…"

This conversation did not take place at a Start-up India conference, it was way back in the 1920s. The politician was Mahatma Gandhi and the young engineer was Kapil Ram Vakil.

Vakil found an 'angel investor' (Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad) who offered him 1,700 acres of land free of cost, on the northwestern tip of the Gulf of Kutch. Here, in 1926, Okha Salt Works was born with the objective of 'recovering minerals from the sea'. Which was easier said, than done.

As the American chemical engineer Edgar Teeple once said, "The problem at first looks simple, delightfully easy, almost any chemist would have undertaken it with a feeling of confidence and a sense of merely taking a short stroll through a pleasant path in the woods…."

But then the path begins to meander, obstructions arise, detours must be made…

In 1936, Vakil requested his former employer to take over the struggling enterprise. On 23 January 1939, Tata Chemicals was registered on the Bombay Stock Exchange.

Eight decades on, the company is run by a highly qualified set of professionals with systems, processes, access to capital. But there is still no 'pleasant path in the woods'.

Obstructions to clear, detours to navigate and new paths to chart—that is the job of R Mukundan. An engineer, an MBA, a man reluctant to speak about his journey.

A journey that has lessons for all of us, who are walking the professional path.

For what it means to be a company, whose DNA is not only to make money. But to live by values, to strive and to serve.

R Mukundan was born in Chennai but grew up in Delhi.

"Many people forget their mother tongue and leave their roots… but that didn't happen to me."

Mukundan attended the Delhi Tamil Education Society school, where Tamil was compulsory till Class 8. But it wasn't part of some grand design, this was the closest school—a good school—within walking distance. Mukundan was neither at the top of the class nor at the bottom—he was somewhere in the middle.

Mukundan's father worked with a private company but the family had modest means. The one thing it really valued was education. His father was also a practical man.

"When I was in Class 7 or 8, he made me go and learn typing so that 'if nothing else works out… you can at least get a job as a stenographer'."

Pressing the keys of the Remington typewriter wasn't a lot of fun back then. And the job of stenographer does not even exist anymore (so much for 'safety nets'!).

"But I sure can type on my computer at a whizzing speed… without looking at the screen!" grins Mukundan.

Coming back to his schooldays, Mukundan was a good student, but never the class topper. He scored a 75% in Class 12 which—in those days—was a decent score. A 'distinction'.

That year, he also prepared for the IIT entrance with the help of Russian books, which were cheaply available.

"There was no concept of coaching… and neither was there any crazy competitive spirit."

In 1984, Mukundan joined the electrical engineering program at IIT Roorkee.[1] Where his worldview expanded significantly. Mukundan was part of the group which set up the first Spic-Macay chapter in Roorkee to popularise Indian classical music. He spent hours reading in the library, mostly literature. And got exposed to sports like squash and billiards.

"I was more of a participant than a leader… not the extroverted, 'let's have fun' kind."

As he was completing the course at Roorkee, Mukundan had 3 job offers: Tata Motors, Tata Steel and Voltas. Studying abroad was another popular option.

> *I have never worked for any company, other than Tata. But within Tata I've had flexibility to work in many different sectors.*

"There was a big choice to make at that point of time but I was clear that I need to be here, in India. And I didn't see myself as a technical or research guy, so I decided to do an MBA."

So it was that Mukundan joined the Faculty of Management Studies (FMS), Delhi. Staying at home was a convenient option, though a bit of an adjustment, after 4 years in hostel. What's more, his parents had shifted to Noida, so it was a long commute each day. But it was worth the effort. As FMS opened up a whole new world of ideas and issues.

"When Amartya Sen came to Delhi School of Economics—right next door—you could just hop across and listen to him!"

Among the FMS faculty, Mukundan recalls the fine marketing classes under Prof. Neelamegham. Especially the conceptual frameworks, which are as relevant today as they were 30 years ago. The professor was also a tough taskmaster. When Mukundan submitted his final year project report, he gave it back saying, "It's not up to the mark."

"I felt very bad… but I think it was his way of saying, 'You can do better'!"

The report was about a brand called Rath Vanaspati from DCM Mills.

As the course was ending, once again it was time to think about 'what next'. One thing Mukundan was clear about—he would not join a finance company.

"Just working with money was not exciting… I wanted to be in core operations."

So, Mukundan did summer training in SRF Limited. And for this reason, he was attracted to the Tata Administrative Services (TAS). Tata did not visit any campus for placement. Instead, they invited candidates to the Taj hotel for a day-long selection process. Starting with a written exam, and then, an in-depth interview.

There were 10 other candidates during the TAS round conducted in Delhi. Mukundan was the last to be called for the interview.

"So… I had already made up my mind, I am not going to be selected!"

As it turned out, he was the only candidate selected out of Delhi. The next part of the process was in Bombay—the 'director's round'. At the end of gruelling interviews with the directors of Tata Companies, everyone is taken to the Taj for a fancy meal. And the much-awaited announcement is made, right after.

For Mukundan, it was 'good news'. He had been selected, along with 13 others. The starting salary was a princely sum of ₹3,500.

Formal training was conducted for every batch, starting with week-long classroom sessions at the Tata Management Training Centre (TMTC), Pune. This was followed by a 'Bharat darshan', to get a glimpse of the many Tata enterprises. From Jamshedpur (Tata Steel) to Mithapur (Tata Chemicals) to Munnar (Tata Tea).

TAS probationers then took up projects in these companies during the course of the year. A total of 5 projects, per person.

"The great thing about TAS was that it allowed for flexibility to try various sectors!"

At the end of the year, you get placed in one of the many Tata companies. You can ask for a specific company, or a company can choose you—some mix of both.

Mukundan was asked to join The Indian Hotels Company (popularly known as Taj group). He was to report to the Bombay office and essentially work on 'Projects' (setting up new hotels).

But in the year 1991, all investments were on hold. The tourism industry had collapsed due to the Gulf War.

So the young trainee was packed off to Delhi, to work in a little-known subsidiary—a franchisee bottler to Pepsi.[2] There wasn't much work there. So, finally, Mukundan was given the option of joining another subsidiary, which was in the leather footwear business.

Not quite the career trajectory one had imagined!

But life is a matter of perspective. A lemon can be squeezed into a delicious lemonade.

"Working in a smaller firm meant that you did everything—production planning, logistics, marketing. And that was a great experience."

The factory was in Noida export processing zone, but Mukundan spent much of his time in Germany, trying to get customers. Friends would joke, *'Tu joote ka salesman ban gaya hai'*. But it was exciting enough to feel like 'something more'. The company was making losses, so the very first task was getting it out of crisis.

Mukundan recalls that there was an urgent need for funds, so he wrote to Ajit Kerkar, then Chairman and MD of The Indian Hotels Company.

Mr Kerkar said, "Come to Bombay immediately."

He then personally accompanied Mukundan to EXIM bank, to meet with Tarjani Vakil, then Executive Director of the bank, and make an appeal for credit. Ms Vakil called the Central Bank and instructed them to release the funds immediately. Had the money come in late—which was common—the company would have lost a big order.

Was it necessary for Ajit Kerkar to come to this meeting? Maybe not. But it created a lasting impression on the young manager's mind.

"It was a lesson to me that as a leader you have to step in during a crisis… those are the moments when you create a person who believes in you."

Mukundan also experienced a labour strike, for the very first time. The company's stand was 'we will be fair, but not buckle under unreasonable demands'. Although the situation became tense, there was constant communication. And here, Mukundan understood something which would serve him well, later in his career.

> *You get the true sense of leadership only when you have in front of you, what I call a 'testing time'.*

"Talking is not a sign of weakness… it is a way of saying, 'I stand firm but I am willing to work with you. Let us figure out how!'"

Ultimately, the workforce did come back and on terms which were equitable.

After 3-and-a-half years in this start-up like job,[3] Mukundan requested a transfer. One of the exciting new things happening in the Tata group, at that time, was the launch of Indica. To get the car on the road, a new company called TACO (Tata Auto Components) had been set up. This was the company which Mukundan joined. Once again, entering uncharted waters.

A car has critical sub systems: interiors, electricals, air conditioning, seating, and so on. Mukundan's role was to get foreign companies to come and invest in a joint venture with Tata, so that a supply base could be established. And initially, this was tough. While the Tatas believed India would soon be a million-car-a-year market, the companies they approached were sceptical.

> *In a turnaround situation, you have about 12–18 months to make a difference.*

"This was back in 1995… they did not believe a car could be designed and produced in India, by an Indian company!"

Only after visiting the Tata Motors plant in Pune would the prospective partner be convinced.

The partners were American, European, Japanese, Korean—each culture had its own way of conducting business. US firms had a strong emphasis on legal and financial controls; the Japanese were very operational, process-driven; and the Koreans had an aggressive execution focus.

Thus, Mukundan was exposed to many working styles and decision-making processes. Which would prove to be a valuable asset, in years to come.

"Another big learning for me was to do with the extreme sense of quality and cost control which automotive companies have."

TACO set up numerous joint ventures, including Tata Auto Plastics (licensed from

French company Sommer Allibert) and Tata Johnson Controls (for automotive seat systems). Over time, these entities grew in size, and in some cases, were bought over by the respective partners.

By the year 2001, TACO was on the path to becoming a ₹1,000-crore company. And after a 50-year stint, Mukundan was itching to grow. His boss explained that the next shift would have to be a lateral one—heading one of the joint venture companies. But these were situated in Pune, or Chennai, or Baroda, and our man was not keen to move.

"We'd just had a kid and I didn't want to relocate and disturb my family…"

Well, it was in that connection that Mukundan went to meet the head of HR. Like all parents, he was worried about his son's LKG admission. Perhaps the Tatas had a tie-up with some reputed school? The HR head shook his head—nothing, officially. But he was happy to make some suggestions.

As Mukundan was about to leave, the HR head said, "You've been with TACO for 5 years… Are you looking for a change?"

The company he had in mind was Tata Chemicals, which was going through a difficult phase. Struck by fire, earthquake and inefficiency of operations, the 70-year-old enterprise had just posted its first ever quarterly loss since 1936 ($37.6 million). Tata Chemicals MD & CEO Prasad Menon had the tough task of turning it around.

"Just go and meet Prasad once," said the HR guy. "See if you like it."

The job was based in Mumbai and came with a promotion from 'General Manager' to 'Vice President'. Mukundan accepted the offer. But a year into the job, there was a surprising development.

"Would you like to work at our manufacturing site in Mithapur?" asked Prasad Menon.

It was Mukundan's wife who counselled him to say 'yes'.

"This question of relocating is coming back to you again and again, maybe it's Providence telling you to go and work on-site!"

When Mukundan arrived in Mithapur, the township was in a state of flux. Prasad Menon had laid out a vision for the rejuvenation of Tata Chemicals, and started its implementation. Processes, policies, safety standards, salary structures—everything was being shaken up.

Some of these changes were easily accepted, others faced resistance.

Among them was 'Action 500'—a bold bid to reduce the cost of producing a tonne of soda ash within ₹500. The inspiration was mostly coming from Tata Steel, which had set out to become the lowest cost steel producer. So why couldn't Tata Chemicals be the lowest cost soda ash producer?

At the same time, quality could not be compromised. A program called 'Manthan' had been devised with the help of McKinsey, with the goal of improving outcomes across the operating spectrum. However, the pace of change had been slow. The purpose of bringing in Mukundan was to 'push things forward'.

But even before he could find his feet at Mithapur, there was a wake-up call… Three workers were crushed to death when a tank fell on them.

"I realised that we did not have the time to go step-by-step… we had to tackle the entire lot of issues, all at once."

One of the first things Mukundan did was address the union. The union leader spoke in Gujarati, but he spoke the language of reason.

"Management and workers are like two cows pulling a cart," he said. "Both have to run at the same speed, in the same direction."

What's more, the union leader stated that he did not want Mithapur to become like the ACC Dwarka unit, which had been closed down.

"From our side we will do everything," said the union, "if the pain and the gain are

equitable to both management and workmen."

In this spirit, there was a massive layoff—management staff went from 800 to 400-odd people; workmen category was reduced from 3,500 to 1,700.

The severance terms were fair and generous. And mostly accepted without acrimony.

'We are all one'—let us not just say it but live by this motto. There used to be separate gates for managers and workers—this was done away with. Canteen food was made common for everybody. The plant and its environs were spruced up, made modern and clean. Environment and safety were a key focus. Investments were made in equipment and technology.

"We also invested in the township so that people felt that there were benefits to cutting costs in the plant."

Not that it was all smooth sailing. There were pulls and pushbacks, differences and diffidence. Everyone was working 10–12 hour days. Learning and unlearning.

"Looking back, maybe I was a bit high-handed and naive… but finally, it all came together. We did perform, we did turn it around!"

The secret was commitment, at the very core. The desire to see 'our company' succeed.

> *You need that larger sense of purpose for industry to survive over long periods of time.*

Mukundan still remembers one early meeting where he said to the team, "The journey is going to be very painful… are we prepared to undertake it?"

A colleague stood up, went to the board and said, "I don't know about you—who has come from Bombay—but I am not gonna allow this unit to go down."

The rest of the team vigorously agreed, the mood was uplifted. It speaks of the character of the team, as well as a deep bond with Mithapur.

To understand this bond, we have to go back in time. The original founder of the company, Dr Kapil Ram Vakil, worked for Tata Sons as 'chief consulting chemist'. He had carried out extensive surveys of the Gujarat shoreline and later worked for the princely state of Saurashtra to set up Shree Shakti Alkali Works—India's first manufacturer of alkalis.

Given his knowledge and experience, the ruler of Baroda state, Sayajirao Gaekwad, invited Dr Vakil to 'undertake the development of salt and alkali industries' in his domain.

"Can you do something for the people in Dwarka?" said the Maharaja. "I am willing to donate a piece of land for this purpose."

Vakil chose Okhamandal, an arid land surrounded by sea on 3 sides, close to a newly developed port. A private limited enterprise called Okhai Saltworks was thus born on 10 September 1926. But despite his best efforts, the plant only made losses. After about a decade, Dr Vakil wrote to J R D Tata, asking if he would like to invest.

The Tatas did their due diligence and came on board. The company continued to make losses but JRD was very clear: wherever Tatas go, they awaken the aspirations of people.

"We cannot just leave suddenly, we must find a way…" he said.

So they hung in there, employing costly Chinese, German and American engineers. The question was how to crack the Solvay process, a closely guarded trade secret then known only to a handful. A brilliant young chemical engineer—educated in the US—joined the company in 1947. His name was Darbari Seth,[4] and he was impervious to failure.

Nor did he believe that foreigners had a monopoly on all original thinking.

Slowly, Okhai Saltworks was transformed into a blue chip operation called Tata

Chemicals. Over the next 50 years, Mithapur created a valuable asset called ‘people’. There were numerous second and third generation employees who had grown up in Mithapur, studied there, chosen to work for the company.

Now, in its time of crisis, they were ready ‘to do whatever it takes’.

At the same, there was a need for fresh blood. The company recruited 70 graduate engineer trainees—chemical and mechanical engineers—under the age of 30.

This combination of old and new, bottom up and top down, process and purpose, wove its magic. In the year ending 2004-05 the company made a profit of ₹32 crores on a turnover of ₹320 crores. In this effort, Prasad Menon was the visionary while Mukundan served as a catalyst.

“I think… when your purpose is positive, every force in the world will sort of come together, to make things happen!”

The whole culture had changed in about 12–18 months—a shift from the paternalistic style of functioning to accountability, for all outcomes. It was time to head home.

Mukund was called to Bombay to head the chemicals business and, more importantly, head the team that was scouting for new opportunities. The purchase of Tetley Tea by the Tatas in the year 2000 had inspired every group company to spread its wings beyond India. And the company Tata Chemicals had set its heart on was Magadi Soda Ash in Kenya.

Magadi produced natural soda ash from alkaline crystals in Lake Magadi. Their cost of production was $70 a tonne, while Mithapur produced synthetic soda ash at $150 a tonne.

The company was owned by the British company Brunner Mond, once part of ICI. And they had no intention of giving up the ‘jewel in their crown’.

‘It’s a jungle out there’—at Ranthambore National Park

The task of acquiring a company is like a classic love story. You approach the object of your affections and get rebuffed. But an ardent suitor will not give up.

"We put in months of research, 'getting to know' the target… and we were patient."

It took four years of pleasantries, preparation and prodding, to win over Brunner Mond.

In December 2005, they accepted the Tata bid of $7.98 billion to acquire operations in 3 countries. Making Tata Chemicals a $1 billion company with a capacity of 3 million tonnes a year (third largest in the world).

Brunner Mond had once been part of ICI, and was later acquired by a group of venture capitalists. The shareholders had no connection with the chemical business. The fear was that the new buyer would be as ruthless and mercenary. Tata Chemicals was the exact opposite —and it was important to communicate that.

As soon as the deal was signed, Homi Khusrokhan drafted a 'welcome letter', sharing what the name Tata means, what it stands for.

"We 'sold' ourselves to them… answered their questions, addressed their fears."

While the British and Dutch were easily convinced, the Kenyans were tougher to crack.

It was only in 1995 that the all-white old boys' club had been disbanded at Magadi Soda Ash. Making way for Titus Naikuni, the first-ever African to head the company. His impression of India was based on the trading community in Kenya, who had prospered in Africa but kept a distance from the local community.

Would the new owners continue to support the hospital, schools and scholarships instituted by the British? Could their word be trusted?

A delegation from Magadi was invited to visit Mumbai and Mithapur, and judge for themselves. Among the visitors was Joel Ole Soyinka, 'senior chief' of the Masaai tribe in the Magadi region. At the end of the trip, Soyinka came to meet Prasad Menon at Bombay House, dressed like a Masaai warrior.

The elder gifted his spear and simply said—"I am now your brother."

Tata Chemicals now turned its attention to Green River Basin in Wyoming, US—a treasure trove of natural soda ash. There were 5 companies in the region, of which 2 were potential buyout targets. Fronting the discussions were Homi Khusrokhan and R Mukundan. In their crosshairs was General Chemical Industrial Products (GCIP).

This time, it was more like a sumo wrestling match, with 2 heavyweights in the ring, sizing each other up. Who would knock whom out?

GCIP had been chasing Brunner Mond, but lost that deal to Tata Chemicals. So, in 2005, they made an offer to buy out Tata Chemicals. That offer was declined.

In December 2007, Tata Chemicals offered $950 million to buy out GCIP. That, too, was rejected. They made a second offer of $1 billion but GCIP refused to budge.

At this stage, Tata Chemicals gave a knockout punch. A hedge fund called Harbinger Capital Partners were the majority shareholder of GCIP.

"We wrote a letter to every member of the Harbinger Board informing them about our two bids…"

All hell broke loose. One faction was clamouring to sell the company, the other wanted to hold out. Meanwhile, Mukundan and Khusrokhan parked themselves in Manhattan. They put together a team of 90 people, working around the clock to do the due diligence. It seemed like GCIP would soon be on the mat….

Surprisingly, Harbinger rejected the final offer—$1.05 billion. On that disappointing day, Mukundan took a stand. No more bargaining, no more bullying.

"To my mind, you must know when to walk away from a deal…"

At 8 pm, the data room was wound up and Mukundan headed to JFK international airport. He had just called his wife and told her—I'm on the way home.

When a call came from Harbinger, requesting one more meeting.

"This is not the way Tatas do business," he replied. "We do not haggle for $5–10 million."

Sensing this was as far as they could push, Harbinger accepted the offer.

In March 2008, Tata Chemicals became a majority shareholder in GCIP, and in the process, the second largest soda ash producer in the world.

Now came the challenge of integration. The Americans were used to working quarter to quarter, whereas the Indians had a vision for 5, or 10 years ahead. When it came to environmental regulations, GCIP believed in doing the bare minimum. Whereas Tata Chemicals was keen to 'do more'.

The biggest point of difference was 'community service'—a difficult concept for some. "We are here to run a profitable enterprise as well as we can," they said. Let the government do the rest—what do we pay taxes for? Gradually, they would turn around and appreciate the 'Tata way'.

Despite cultural differences, Tata Chemicals North America has prospered. It is the single most profitable acquisition for the company, contributing close to 30% of annual revenues.

What an exciting period of growth and development for a 7-decade-old company! Now, further changes were afoot. In 2006, Homi Khusrokhan had taken over as Managing Director of Tata Chemicals. 2 years later, the baton was passed on to R Mukundan. He was just 42,[5] a young age to head a Tata enterprise.

It was a tough time to be in the hot seat. The soda ash business was already under pressure; with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, things got worse.

"Our focus shifted from cost and profit to cost and cash…."

The company implemented a strategy called ADAPT (Action Plan for Downturn Alleviation and Profiting in Turbulence). This was communicated to employees at all levels and all locations. A target was set—to have ₹100 crores cash in the books by the end of the financial year. This meant curtailing pay revisions and overheads, but without retrenching anyone.

The entire management team—including Mukundan himself—began the practice of travelling economy within India and staying in the company guesthouse in most cities.

"In effect, we survived the downturn because of the sacrifices that people have made."

Surprisingly, the recession was good for Tata Chemicals, in unexpected ways.

Tough times bring people together, gives them a sense of purpose. The recession also helped align people across cultures, across boundaries.

"The global chemicals business group is a much stronger team now!"

> *I would always tell the team—you know what, we have to save ourselves. Nobody will come from outside to do it…*

In the midst of crisis, a leader must play the role of firefighter. At the same time, he must be reflective and undertake the task of introspection.

A mission-vision exercise, to identify 'where we are' and 'where we want to go'.

In 2008–09, Tata Chemicals had 3 broad revenue streams: 1. industry facing (soda ash, alkali), 2. farm facing (fertiliser and agrochemical), 3. consumer facing (salt). Each business ran separately and independently, with an underlying sense of shared values. But what worked in the past, may not work in the future….

"My job as MD is—how to deal with change. And preparing the organisation to stay

relevant."

To begin with, Mukundan and his team conducted a deep strategy review. They asked some tough questions and sought new answers.

Should Tata Chemicals—the world's second largest soda ash manufacturer—aspire to become *the* largest in the world? The demand for soda ash was stagnant, at just 2–3% a year. Clearly, Tata Chemicals would need to identify new businesses to enter, new engines for growth.

A study of the top 20 chemical companies in the world revealed a shift away from commodities (where natural resources and efficiency are key) towards specialty chemicals (which are products of science and innovation). And, the future of chemistry lay at the intersections of chemistry and physics, the intersections of chemistry and biology.

"We decided to focus on two areas: nanotechnology and biochemistry. And at the time we had no idea, what products will actually come out of it."

As it happened, Tata Chemicals did not have to set up an R & D lab from scratch.

Since the year 2004, the company had been operating an innovation centre in Pune. However—unlike what one might expect—it was being run in an extremely frugal fashion. The first scientists worked out of Leela Business Park. They then shifted to a 2-bedroom apartment in Baner, and later, to a *mangal karyalaya* (marriage hall) on the outskirts of Pune.

While physical infrastructure may have been makeshift, the intellectual foundation was solid.

In fact, chief scientist Dr Murali Sastry was one of the world's top experts in nanotechnology.

The first product to come out of the centre was Swach—which combines rice husk ash with nano silver particles to purify water, without the use of electricity. Swach was hailed as a by-India, for-India innovation.[6] Built on traditional knowledge, perfected with modern science. To provide safe drinking water to the common man.

"RnT (Ratan Tata) used to say… we should not just be satisfied to meet the highest standards in the world… equally important is that we must also make our technology accessible to all."

Today, Swach sells more than 3 lakh units a year, though prices have consciously been kept low. Hence, revenues are modest. But Swach is certainly a great source of pride.

The product is promoted through regular as well as alternative marketing channels, such as NGOs and village-level entrepreneurs. To take the outreach effort to the next level, Swach will operate under the 'Ncourage Social Enterprise Foundation', set up by Tata Chemicals under Section 8 of the Companies Act.

You can engineer many a molecule in the lab, but how do you get that science to touch human lives? To do this at scale—and as a business—scientists must partner with sellers.

Take nutraceuticals, which is another focus area at the Tata Chemicals Innovation Centre. Between 2007 and 2011, the R & D team was working on a nutraceutical called FOS (fructo-oligosaccharide). This was a known molecule, a dietary fibre which also acts as a replacement for sugar. But existing techniques delivered FOS with low yield and low purity.

"The challenge in the lab was to optimise the blend ratio of micro-organisms, to produce high quality, ready-to-use FOS. And… we were able to do that!"

At Innovista 2011—the innovation challenge event within the Tata group—Tata Chemicals highlighted its work with FOS. The team went on to bag a prestigious award. It was 'something new', it was 'promising'. But would this translate into a viable business? It was time for the marketing team to step in!

One of the first to sign up for the challenge was Rahul Gupta, who'd been handling large, global customers for the legacy business (worth a sizable ₹450 crores). But selling a nutraceutical required a complete change of mindset. This was a new concept, for which

customers had to be found and patiently fostered.

What Rahul and team did was to bring in chefs and food technologists who could work with clients to create recipes which were palatable and saleable. The first port of call in any company was the head of R & D. Here, the conversation was only around the 'science' behind FOS. Once the R & D was convinced, commercial discussions started.

> *A process must include a way of questioning itself, so that it can be self-improving.*

Over time, the team discovered that FOS was well suited for bakery items. But one fine day, a customer said, "Can you create an ice cream for health-conscious customers?" It took more than a year to crack the product—get the right taste point—but the chefs and scientists delivered. The product is now in the market as Amul pro-life and sugar-free ice cream.

But the market for nutraceuticals goes beyond giant corporations with ISO-certified factories.

"We saw a great opportunity in fortifying Indian sweets… especially in the context of diabetes being a major health issue."

So, today, when you buy 'low calorie' mithai from Aakash Sweets in Indore or K C Das in Kolkata, you are consuming FOS. The nutraceutical is sold in powder and liquid form, and halwais are trained in 'how to use'. And this strategy has paid good dividends. The bulk of sales (60%) comes from smaller accounts, the rest from large corporate entities.

After more than 5 years of market development, Tata Chemicals is convinced of the scalability of the FOS business. The company has recently invested ₹270 crores in a state-of-the-art plant in Nellore, to produce fructo-oligosaccharide on a large scale. With a focus on selling to global customers.

The nutraceutical story is one of 'slow cooking' a business over a period of 10 years, until it comes to a boil. But it is not the only new business that the company was nurturing… For Mukundan and team had also identified an opportunity in the consumer space. Where Tata Chemicals already had a powerful presence, with a single brand—Tata Salt.

Back in 1983, Tata Chemicals had entered the business of salt, which was a co-product at the Mithapur plant. Around the same time, the Government of India embarked on the iodisation program. At that time, Tata Chemicals was the only manufacturer of vacuum-evaporated salt.

"We came forward to support the iodisation campaign and became the first brand to get into that space."

> *It is chemistry that decides whether mergers and acquisitions fail or succeed.*

3 decades later, *desh ka namak* was Tata namak, with a commanding share of the branded salt market. Over the years, the company had built a strong distribution chain. Which was a valuable asset. Think of it like this—the pipe which takes one product to the customer can be used to sell many more products in the broad area of food.

The team surveyed the market, looking for a large-volume product with regular,

monthly consumption. They looked at oil, wheat and rice but finally zeroed in on pulses. The logic was that dal is an important nutritional element in the Indian diet, across states, and more so for the large vegetarian population.

"Our thinking was that dal is a traditional food, which can be presented in a modern way."

The bottleneck is that demand for dal always falls short of supply. While Indians consume 18 million tonnes of pulses annually, production is only 15 million tonnes. The balance is imported and this leads to volatility in prices. That is a risk one would certainly like to mitigate.

To solve this problem, Tata Chemicals started working closely with its subsidiary Rallis India, which has a strong connect with farmers.

"We were able to influence the farming community to 'Grow More Pulses'[7] under a Public Private Partnership program."

In 2011, the company launched iShakti—a range of branded pulses. Buoyed by the response from the market, in 2015, Tata Chemicals launched spices under a newly created umbrella brand, 'Sampann'. Recently, the company has forayed into the ready-to-cook segment with chilla mix and multigrain khichdi mix.

So, how does one decide which products to develop?

In November 2017, chef Sanjeev Kapoor created a record for cooking 918 kg of khichdi at the World Food Congress. This was the inspiration for the Sampann team.

Ashim Mullick, who currently heads the Tata Chemicals innovation centre,[8] says it was a huge challenge to get the right taste and texture. Also, millets like bajra are complex to work with. However, with passion and determination, an inter-disciplinary team was able to launch the khichdi mix in just 52 days.

Now, in the past, the company would launch any new product through the kirana store network. But today, the strategy is 'online first', to quickly gauge customer response.

"We put the ready mixes on Amazon and Big Basket. The khichdi has been a hit but the bhajiya mix was a failure… it is being reformulated!"

Ideas that work are those that are rooted in ground realities. And, these ideas can come from anywhere. Mukundan recalls a market visit in Nagpur.

He asked a retailer, "How is business… *Aur kya kar sakte hain* (What more can we do)?"

The retailer retorted, "*Aap log sahi planning nahin karte* (You don't do proper planning)!"

The CEO was intrigued… what did this mean?

"Sir, you have launched chana dal," he said. "But the problem is with besan (powdered chana dal). *Usme* there is adulteration."

The Tata brand, he pointed out, stands for trust. *Aapka besan log kharidenge*.

Well, besan was part of future plans, but based on this insight, the launch of the product was fast-forwarded. And today, besan accounts for 30% of the volumes of Sampann!

Entering any new business is not easy. You *will* make mistakes—and they could be expensive ones.

After careful thought, the Sampann team had hit upon the idea of 'harvest-time sourcing' of pulses. The logic was that you buy in bulk once a year and sell throughout the year. So, you can offer a stable price to customers. However, this model went for a toss when the government changed its procurement policies.

The Sampann team learnt an important lesson, and reconfigured its strategy. The company no longer keeps a large inventory. However, during this transition, in the second quarter of 2017, the company suffered a loss of ₹40 crores. This would have been a huge setback for any other player. But Tata Chemicals was able to absorb the shock.

The soda ash business may not provide high growth prospects but it generates more than 60% of the revenue of the company and a bulk of the profit. It is the ‘cash cow’ which supports all the new ventures…. An internal venture capitalist with deeper reserves of patience than any outside investor.

This is good because a lab-to-market strategy is a tough road. It takes a lot of conviction.

> *As a CEO, you are answerable to your Board, your Chairman, your shareholders. Managing that becomes fairly critical.*

And a ‘lagey raho’ approach.

The scientists have ‘nano plastic’ solutions to make ‘lightweight’ cars. There are no takers.

They formulated ‘nano cement’, which has a different setting strength. It never took off.

There was a great concept called ‘nano fertiliser’. Farmers did not adopt it.

So, the challenge is to take a technology and find an industry where it ‘fits’.

“If you look at silica, our scientists can manipulate it into many different forms… which could be applied in the paper industry, the cosmetics industry…”

But it was tyre manufacturers like CEAT who showed interest in incorporating HDS (Highly Dispersible Silica) into their product. So for the last 3 years, Tata Chemicals has been working with them to co-develop an application. To take it to scale, the company has invested ₹295 crores, which includes the acquisition of a silica plant in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu.

By acquiring, instead of building from scratch, the time taken from testing the idea to commercial production has been reduced substantially.

Still, compared to the start-up world, the pace feels slow. Mukundan is philosophical about it.

“Turning a ship takes time… once a new direction is set, then it can go fast. I think, we are still at the point of turning the ship….”

The Tatas believe in an evolutionary approach. But where necessary, it can be revolutionary.

This is clear from the tough decision taken to sell the fertiliser business, due to which the turnover of Tata Chemicals has fallen from ₹17, 708.14 crores (in FY 2015-16) to ₹ 10,345.36 crores (in FY 2017-18).

Why would any company take such a drastic step? To understand this, let us rewind a bit.

In 1994, Tata Chemicals had set up a urea-based fertiliser plant in Babrala, Uttar Pradesh. The company later acquired Unilever’s phosphate-based fertiliser plant, situated in Haldia, West Bengal. But a cold, hard look at this business made one thing clear: this was not the most efficient use of capital.

“We realised that fertiliser is a subsidy-based business, and after 2 decades, we had less than 3% market share.”

A decision was therefore taken to sell the fertiliser business. This process took 3–4 years to complete, as Tata Chemicals was keen to find the ‘right buyer’. Finally, in 2018, the Babrala and Haldia plants were sold to Yara and IndoRama fertilisers respectively. The employees are adjusting to this new reality, losing that sense of belonging with the ‘Tata

family'…

Like a gardener lovingly prunes the branches of trees, so must a CEO prune the branches of his business. To revitalise the entity as a whole.

The loss of the fertiliser business has actually boosted the profits of Tata Chemicals. From a net profit of ₹780.16 crores in FY 2015-16 to ₹2702.49 in FY 2017-18. While the legacy business of soda and the agrochemical business of subsidiary Rallis India continue to dominate, that will change over the next 3–5 years.

"We expect our new businesses to contribute 50-60% of the total pie!"

In this context, mention must be made of the Rallis Innovation Chemistry Lab in Bangalore, which is working on eco-friendly farm solutions. And Metahelix Life Sciences, a young biotech company designing hybrid varieties of seeds, which has been acquired by Rallis India.

The number of balls 'up in the air' is many… it is a skill to keep an eye on them all. And what about 'life outside work'? How does one juggle it all…

"I think there is nothing called work-life balance," says Mukundan. "There is no trade-off between the two, you need to maximise both."

It is easier said than done, of course. With so many international operations, Mukundan needs to schedule quite a bit of travel. And take late-night calls.

One casualty in the process has been Mukundan's fitness regime. Which has gone from 10 laps of Wankhede stadium to a bit of yoga and a morning walk. Music is something he looks forward to during the walk—from classic Hindi songs to new Hindi songs to jazz—all streaming on a Bose headset.

Reading is another favourite pastime. A book he recently read which had a big impact was intriguingly titled: *All I Want To Know Is Where I'm Going To Die So I'll Never Go There: Buffett & Munger—A Study in Simplicity and Uncommon, Common Sense*. It was recommended by a shareholder of Tata Chemicals as a guide on 'how to do things better'!

With his son studying in the US, it's 'empty nest' syndrome at home.

Family holidays happen, with careful planning. Though limited to a week or 10 days, the idea is to get the maximum out of these days.

"I like to research a place before visiting… it makes the travel experience much richer!"

His wife complains that even when he is outside India, 'he is always looking for Indian food'. Mukundan smiles… he is like that only.

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[1] Formerly University of Roorkee and Thomason College of Civil Engineering, converted into IIT in 2001.

[2] Lehar Pepsi was a JV between Voltas, Pepsi and the Punjab Government.

[3] The company later merged with Tata Exports, which is now known as Tata International.

[4] Darbari Seth went on to lead Tata Chemicals, Tata Tea and also set up TERI.

[5] Most Tata CEOs at the time were in their late 50s and 60s.

[6] Swach was a joint effort of Tata Chemicals Innovation Centre and the Tata Research Development and Design Centre, Pune.

[7] Tata Chemicals currently works with 150,000 farmers across 4 states to source pulses.

[8] Now a state-of-the-art facility in Darawali, near Pune.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed job, to do things right
And I think to myself...
What a wonderful world

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

I would simply say that you must work, at the same time you must enjoy what you do.

And the second thing is that it's very important to work with people who have the same values as you have, then you don't have any confusion in your mind.

The position, the roles, everything comes, provided these two things are in place.

As the head of a company you realise that team members are experts in their own field and one of the key things that you do is to provide the 'glue'… Which means, together we agree on a sense of purpose and I can, at best, be the orchestrator of that sense of purpose, nothing more than that.

The world is rapidly changing, so be open and receptive to juniors, shareholders, suppliers—you never know where the next big idea is gonna come from!

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

Even CSR needs 'business thinking' and leadership to thrive

And sometimes, the manager must double up as the model!

In 1996, the Kutch region was hit by a severe drought. At that time, the Tata Chemicals Society for Rural Development (TCSRD) began working with women in surrounding villages.

Ramiben Nangesh, from Arambhada village in Okhamandal, was one of them.

"*… tab bees behnon ke saath gaon mein jaakar kaam shuru kiya…*" she recalls.

All 20 women were members of the Rabari tribe, known for their distinctive tattoos, jewellery and clothing with traditional hand embroidery and applique work.

So why not use those skills to earn some extra income?

It was a good idea, but there were many obstacles. First of all, the women were unwilling to leave their homes and come to work at a centre. So now, what to do?

"We came up with distributed manufacturing… the materials and instructions were dropped to homes by rickshaw, and picked up when complete."

In 2002, TCSRD set up a collective called 'Okhai', giving the initiative a formal

identity. More women started coming on board.

"We went to NIFT Gandhinagar to learn what is designing, marketing, costing and quality control!" says Ramiben, who is now a 'master craftsperson' and a Board member of Okhai.

The finished goods were sold under the brand name 'Okhai' in Mithapur and Jamshedpur (within Tata townships) and a retail outlet in Ahmedabad.

But in June 2015, all this changed. Kirti Poonia was a young engineer who had worked with TCS, TAS and Tata Chemicals. She took a bold and unusual decision.

"I've always been inclined towards fashion… so, on the request of a Board member, I volunteered for a 3-month project with Okhai," she says.

To begin with, Kirti travelled to all the locations where women made Okhai products, to understand the artisans better.

"I realised that Okhai must operate with the same rigour as any other fashion brand!"

One way was to bring the artisans out into the world—to attend exhibitions in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. So they could see and interact with their customers.

Slowly, the women gained confidence and an understanding of 'what will sell'.

The second piece was to make Okhai products available widely, which was now possible through e-commerce. But how to generate consumer pull, with a zero budget?

Kirti set up an Instagram and Facebook account. Not only was she Okhai's 'social media manager', she also doubled up as a model.

"One of the pictures has me on my cell phone, pretending to work, while the artisan is still working on the outfit…"

These posts full of joy and colour soon attracted a large following (29.6k on Insta, 108.7k on FB). And with this popularity, came a sharp increase in sales on the Okhai website.

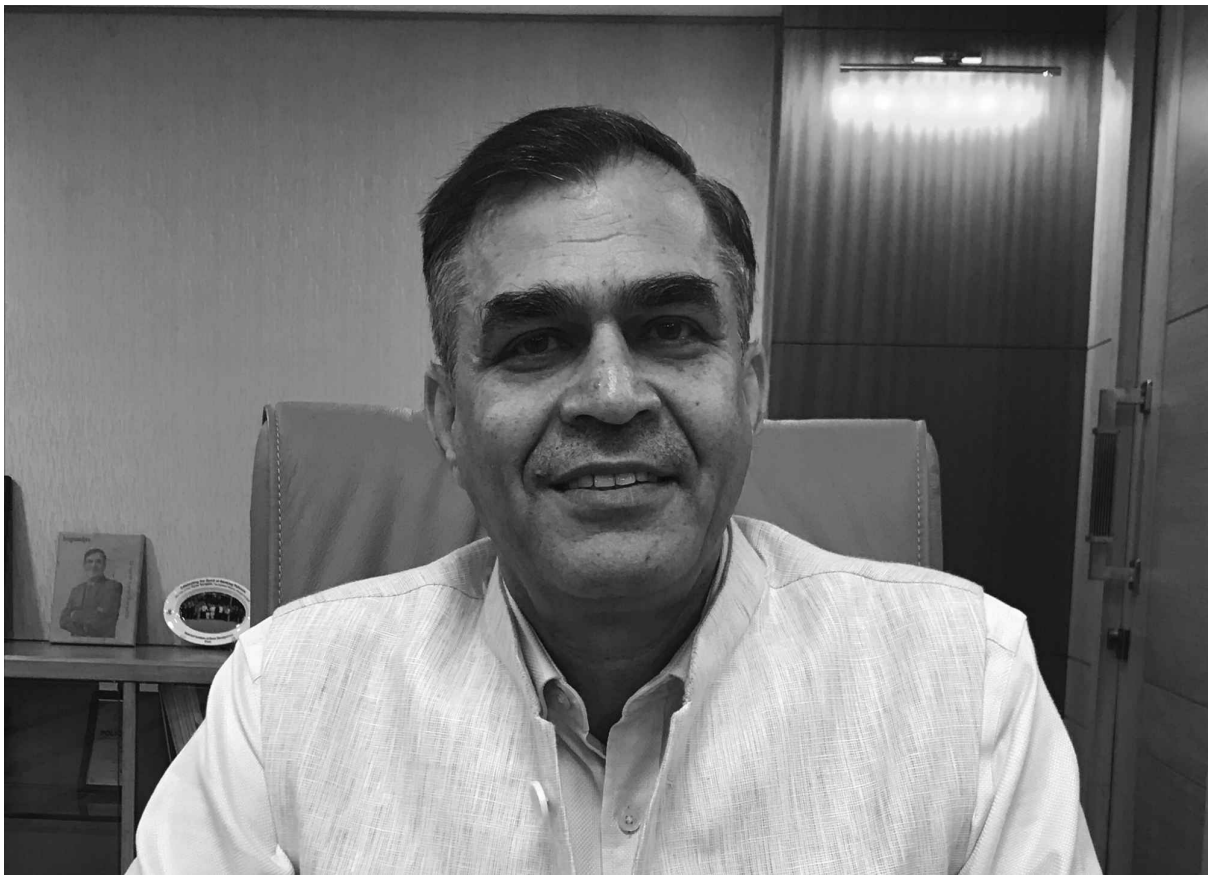
Today, Okhai engages 1,400 women across India and is all set to close the FY 2019 with over ₹3 crores in sales.

The plan is to on-board artisans from all parts of India, to retail on the Okhai platform.

The 3-month project never officially ended—Kirti Poonia now heads the project. She doesn't feel like this is a job. It's her calling.

As a young girl, Kirti once made a 'business plan' on the back of her school notebook, to start a fashion line. But today, she doesn't feel the need to do that.

"Intrapreneurship is every bit as exciting as being an entrepreneur. With the muscle of a large organisation… I can do so much more!"



HARSH BHANWALA

NABARD

It’s tough to be a banker today. Harsh Bhanwala is one of the few who can hold his head high. During his tenure, the NABARD balance sheet has grown from ₹213,000 crores to ₹354,000 crores, with zero net NPAs (Non-Performing Assets). Even as its mission has expanded far beyond giving credit, to solving the problems of the farmers in India.

SON OF THE SOIL

The office of NABARD (National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development) is a vast, maze-like building in Bandra Kurla Complex.

There is space, a lot of space. Something rare in the city of Mumbai.

The Chairman's office is larger than the house I live in. It is bare, it is impressive.

Behind a large desk sits a man who, even when sedentary, exudes exuberance and energy. A genuine smile, a sparkle in the eye.

As a young IIM graduate, Harsh Bhanwala took the unusual step of joining a less glamorous public institution, instead of a multinational.

And 20 years on, he took the unusual step of leaving the security—and perks—of such a job to join the private sector.

Only to return some years later, as its Chairman.

This is a man with the strength of conviction. But, also, a man who did not lose touch with his roots. He understands the 'real India', and he still cares.

We are discussing climate change. Harsh tells me that NABARD is the only national entity to receive accreditation from the 'Green Climate Fund'.

I can't help being cynical. So many organisations pay lip service to such causes. It sounds good and it looks good in the annual report.

But then he remarks, "*Main aur aap AC mein baith kar baat kar rahe hain, baahar ki garmi hamein affect nahin kar rahi hai* (We are sitting in an air-conditioned office, it doesn't matter to us how hot it is outside). Climate change affects the poor the most."

And somehow, it matters. It matters that the person who looks at big data and makes big decisions never forgets who his real 'customer' is.

Ek kisaan, ek jeeta jaagta insaan. Not just a number on a spreadsheet.

Stay humble, stay grounded, no matter how high you fly.

Aise shakhs bane aur bane rahein, yehi meri dua hai.

Harsh Bhanwala was born in Kasandhi, a village in Sonepat district of Haryana.

"Though we belong to the farming community, both my parents were teachers and my mother had a very big influence on me."

Not only was she probably the first woman graduate in the district, but also headmistress of the Kanya Gurukul in Khanpur Kalan.[1] A disciplined lady, in the tradition of Arya Samaj, Mataji performed yagya every morning. She also ensured that Harsh and his 3 sisters woke up at 5 am—*chahe garmi ho ya sardi*.

"We got breakfast only after completing our daily chores!"

But it was not all work and no play. As a child, Harsh roamed freely in the green fields surrounding the village. The family owned around 5 acres of land, where they grew various crops. Images of *peele-peele sarson ke khet and gehun ke phool* flowering in winter are etched in his memory.

"Every crop had a smell and your sense of being close to nature was phenomenal.… I loved being there!"

In Class 7, Harsh got admission to Motilal Nehru School of Sports, a residential school started by the Haryana government. The school was run on a grant from the sports department but provided an all-round education, along the lines of prestigious public schools like Delhi Public School and Mayo College. At a minimal cost.

"The students were all from rural backgrounds, various parts of Haryana… most of us could not speak English."

The school offered many new experiences: debates, public speaking, team sports. Even the taste of custard was a novelty. Twice a year, the boys went trekking in Himachal or Uttarakhand. Walking 15 km, carrying backpacks and tents, was no easy thing. But team spirit kept them going.

"We would sing, keep up each other's morale. Every small milestone would give a sense of achievement."

Twice a year, during vacations, it was back to the village. *Time pass kaise hota tha?* Sharing jokes, playing cards (games like teen-do-paanch). The siblings would sit together composing rhymes and doing harmless mimicry. Friends, teachers, elders—no one was spared! But *mazaak bhi aisa, kisi ko hurt na kare*.

After an excellent stint as a student and house captain, it was time to go to college. There was no guidance, no career counselling.

"I knew only one thing—'*professional course karna hai'*. Because that will get me a job!"

Based on his Class 12 marks, Harsh got admission to a leading state engineering college and National Dairy Research Institute (NDRI), Karnal. A well-wisher said, if you do dairy processing, job is assured. Based on this, he joined NDRI for the 4-year Dairy Technology program which covered Chemistry, Biochemistry, Genetics, Engineering and Food Processing.

> *Both my upbringing and education made me very positive, very broad-minded. When I passed out of school, I didn't know what is 'caste'!*

In the third year, each student had to complete an internship. Harsh was sent to Indo-Danish, a milk products factory in Saharanpur. This meant working night shifts, and the toilets, the accommodation, everything was rudimentary. The experience was an eye-opener.

"I don't want to work in such a place!" he thought.

Naukri is important, but just any old job won't do. "I want a job like my jijaji."

Harsh's elder sister was married to an MBA, an IIM Ahmedabad graduate. He worked for a multinational, travelled in cars and planes. When he went on field visits, 2-3 juniors were always with him. Harsh decided—this is the life! He turned to jijaji for advice—how to prepare for CAT?

It was the early '80s, coaching classes were yet to come up. So Harsh brushed up his vocabulary, worked on his reading speed.

"I used to carry a small pocket diary. If I read an editorial in a magazine, I would jot down what I had understood, in my own words."

Being a BTech graduate, *Maths toh theek hi tha*. Harsh cracked CAT on his first attempt and joined IIM Ahmedabad's 2-year postgraduate program in the SPA batch (Specialisation in Agriculture). The first year of SPA is common with the regular MBA; in the second year, the focus is on the rural sector.

Like almost everyone who joins IIMA, Harsh was in for a bit of a shock. No spoon-feeding, no cramming. You are expected to read, prepare for case studies, participate in class discussions. And as and when they feel like it, professors will administer a surprise quiz.

"I remember the first quiz in MSM (Mathematic & Statistics in Management), taken by Prof V L Mote. Nearly 130 out of 180 students in the class almost failed!"

Of course, soon enough students do find their feet, settle into an equilibrium. Harsh was never a topper but somewhere in the middle of the class. He also made full use of various sporting facilities on campus and enjoyed being part of the most happening dorm—D18.

"We had maximum I-Schols (rankers) and maximum weekend parties with lots of *halla-gulla!*"

In his second year, Harsh was elected general secretary of the Student Affairs Council. He enjoyed taking charge and 'doing things' for students' welfare. There was a lot of sporting stuff—winning the inter-IIM competition, running the first-ever marathon from Ahmedabad to Gandhinagar (a city just coming up then).

As G-Sec, Harsh also initiated an inter-dorm *dahi-handi* and a banana-eating competition. Yes—how many bananas can you eat in 2 minutes! Nobody had much money, you couldn't go to restaurants or movies very often. So one had to find other ways to have fun!

"GKR (*ganne ka ras*) was our favourite drink," laughs Harsh.

On the career front, Harsh did his summer project with Brooke Bond and got final placement offers from private sector companies. But he chose to join NABARD (National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development), an organisation set up by the government in 1982.

There were 2 reasons for this. NABARD was a new entity, so Harsh felt his growth prospects would be good. The second was an emotional reason.

"I felt that I will work for rural areas… and after all, I am from a rural area. So that part was led by feeling."

On 5 November 1985, Harsh Bhanwala joined NABARD as a Grade B officer. His first posting was in Lucknow, a city he fell in love with immediately. It had *bade sheher wali* facilities but the heart of a small town. You could be 'gunjing', i.e. roaming around in Hazratganj, and 5 people would recognise you and say 'hello'.

"This feeling of being related, being part of something—a community, or a larger pool of people—comes from my childhood days."

The young officer worked with the project appraisal department, which sanctioned term loans to banks. The projects were in the areas of food processing and rural development. Within a few weeks, Harsh felt a bit disillusioned. He was not the sanctioning authority. All he did was forward files to his boss, who was the decision-maker.

"It was a big shock… because when you leave IIMA, you dream that 'I will do something', 'I will be heard', 'I will turn things around'."

But, soon enough, he realised that this was part and parcel of working with a large institution. That even if you are only giving inputs, you *can* make a difference. At the same time, there was a lot of learning. About the banking system, rural development and dealing with state governments.

In fact, within a few months of joining, the fresh MBA was drafted to give inputs to the Khusro Committee, which went on to produce a landmark report on rural credit. Early in his career, Harsh was also put on the Board of Directors of the Regional Rural Bank (RRB). So growth and exposure—both were phenomenal.

But was it not a challenge, being an MBA, in an organisation which had very few with this qualification?

"*Main do cheez kehna chahunga*," says Harsh. "Half your problems arise because of you, half your problems arise because of others."

Either way, the only solution is a positive mindset. There was a bit of heartburn among some Grade B officers, who were 45-50 years of age. *Ki yeh kal ka chhokra kahan se seedha Grade B afsar ban gaya*. But on the whole, seniors were a guiding force. Though there was no formal 'mentorship'.

> *The way in which you write reports, how you involve yourself, that creativeness is in your hands. Even at the lowest rung of the organisation.*

A couple of incidents, early in his career, left an indelible mark.

Part of Harsh's job was to visit various branches of banks, where money had been disbursed. To monitor how those projects were faring. One such branch was in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. It was the early '90s, when the government had announced the first-ever 'loan waiver'.

"The general feeling among the public was *ab toh paisa wapas karna nahin hai!*"

But even at that time, there was one field officer of State Bank of India, who had more than 90% recovery. Harsh was amazed, how was this possible?

The secret was the tremendous contact this officer had with all his clients. He would enquire about their family, their children, their health.

"*Kuch anaaj bika? Kitne mein bika* (Have you sold your wheat? What price)?"

Only then would he gently ask, "*Kuch recovery doge kya? Main le jaun* (Can you give some repayment? Can I come and collect it)?" Even in the most adverse situations, people-to-people contact can bring huge positives in your business. It was a lesson the young officer would never forget.

Another time, Harsh visited Gorakhpur district to do a monitoring and evaluation of the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP). At one of the villages that he went to, he was shocked by the abysmal level of poverty. Completely different from the village life he knew.

"I saw young girls… who didn't have proper clothes to wear. So they would hesitate to come out of their *jhopdis*."

A goat, a few mud utensils, a charpai—these were their worldly possessions.

"I thought to myself, 'My God, this really needs a lot of intervention…!'"

There is a pause, for that image still carries the residue of emotion. "*Aaj bhi jab main sochta hoon kitna interest charge karein, wahi garib aurat mujhe yaad aa jati hai… woh kya degi bichari* (Even today, when I think, how much interest should we charge, that abjectly poor woman comes to my mind… what is her paying capacity, I wonder)."

Too often we forget who we are serving, for she is not visible on the balance sheet.

Growing up in a home with strong women, Harsh had not been conscious of gender discrimination. But now it was clear as daylight.

"The women in villages I visited never knew that they could be equal… the very thought was alien!"

So, along with banking and credit fundas, the young manager got a sense of social and human fundas. *Kahaan pataa tha jab yeh job choose kiya!*

The only drawback at NABARD was that payscales could not match the private sector. But that didn't bother Harsh. The teachings of the Arya Samaj state that, whatever you earn, you should give some portion to charity. Needs were limited, desires were few. A small house, a Bajaj scooter…

"Then when I got married, I wanted a small car to travel comfortably with my wife and child… *prabhu ne woh bhi de di* (God granted my wish)."

So a little more money was never a reason to leave the organisation. The role and responsibility were what gave Harsh a 'kick'.

In 1990, Harsh was promoted and posted to Meerut as a District Development Manager. 21 managers had been chosen for 21 districts; their main job was to work with government entities to increase credit flow. As well as undertake developmental work such as formation of farmers' clubs and self-help groups.

"Here I learnt about what is basically 'social capital formation'."

Since his wife was an assistant professor at Government Degree College in Rohtak, Harsh sought a transfer to Haryana. After 7 years in the state, he was promoted to DGM (Deputy General Manager) and posted to Delhi. Where an unusual opportunity came his way. The Delhi State Co-operative Bank was struggling.

A family friend, who was also a minister, asked him, "Can you help?"

The bank was indeed 'sick', and common sense would say, keep away. But Harsh looked at it differently. As part of NABARD, he had been pushing other entities.

Never forget whom you are serving

"This was a chance to do things on my own… *kaam mushkil tha, challenging tha*, but that's what excited me!"

In December 1999, Harsh went on deputation to the Delhi State Co-operative Bank as its Managing Director. The bank's customers were labour societies, consumer societies, housing societies, village co-operative societies and individuals. The recovery rate for loans was below 50%, there were accumulated losses.

Deposits were not growing. The morale of the staff was extremely low.

So, your task is to revive a sick unit. But *where* do you start?

"I did not have a plan," says Harsh. "I am a very down-to-earth, simple and practical person. I began by showing some small results." The most basic indicator of the health of a bank is the money it makes. So Harsh put his initial focus on better management of funds. The key was attracting bulk deposits. The fastest way to do this was to tinker a bit with the interest rate and manage any surplus on a day-to-day basis.

"I put some money in investment options that had arbitrage opportunity, and we made a small profit."

This created a ripple of positivity. On the second day itself, 2 employees burst into his office, excited and happy that *"Aaj itne paise bane"*. The next day it was 5.

Harsh used this window of opportunity wisely. Managers often came to him saying, "I have some personal work, please give me *chhutti*."

The MD would reply, "Go write your application and I will grant you leave. *Lekin ek shart par*. Get today's *Economic Times* and tell me the news on interest rates."

Each one would be asked to find out the bank rate, repo rate, CBLO rate or the call money rate, before getting his application cleared. And in this way, slowly, people started taking more interest in their work. Reading newspapers, following what other banks are doing.

Another important thing the MD did was spruce up the premises. Paan stains in the

stairwells became a thing of the past. Neatness, cleanliness was the new mantra.

A young man came up to the MD and expressed his gratitude. “Sir, I am very thankful to you. *Aapne office achcha bana diya, toh meri sagaai ho gayi!*”

Slowly, the culture began shifting. From pushing a few papers and pocketing their salary, there was a desire to ‘do more’. New recruitments were made, the bank expanded from 27 to 45 branches. However, a few prickly pears remained. The brazen fellows who would simply sign the register and then hang around doing nothing. Because they were politically connected. And had no intention of working. The problem was, their presence had a bad influence on everyone else.

The MD made them an offer. We will set up a place on the top floor, you can drink tea there, chat.… Be in office, but don’t disturb the other staff.

Alternatively, you do something. *Bolo, kaun sa kaam kar sakte ho*.

> *How do you work with the poorest of poor, how do we graduate wage-earners to the self-employment category? I used to keep thinking…*

One of the men thought for a minute and replied, “Sir, *main recovery kar sakta hoon* (I can help with loan recovery).”

Well, that did make sense. The chap had influence, he had *rutba* (status) in his community. There was just one problem. He was a class 4 employee—a peon.

“Saheb, log chaprasi samjhenge toh baat banegi nahin.”

When in doubt, study what the rulebook says. Harsh read up the Co-operative Societies Act and found a couple of little-known points. During British times, there used to be a post of ‘bailiff’. The bailiff was also a class 4 employee, but could issue notices from a collector / assistant collector for recovery.

What’s more, as per the Act, the Registrar of co-operative societies could delegate ‘Assistant Collector powers’ to the staff of an entity like the bank.

The troublemaker was pleased with the new ‘designation’ and the job description. He had one more demand.

“*Saheb, ek jeep chahiye*. It will create the right impression, *ki bhai recovery waale aaye hain*.”

The MD replied, “Show me some results. I will get you the jeep.”

And in this unconventional manner, a whole lot of bad debts were repaid.

A sick man must one day leave the hospital. And then focus on better health and nutrition. For a bank, that nourishment is in the form of new business.

In the year 2000, the Supreme Court gave a judgement that said all buses plying in Delhi must run on CNG. When the news broke, Harsh saw it as a big opportunity.

He said to his team, “We will fund this activity.”

And before any of the commercial banks could jump in the fray, the Delhi State Co-operative Bank had signed an agreement with the concerned department.

When industries were asked to move out of Delhi, the government decided to convert Narela and adjoining villages into industrial estates. Once again, the Delhi State Co-operative Bank was at the forefront. It funded the acquisition of plots with the help of tripartite agreements, ensuring excellent recovery.

“We also saw huge potential with our existing customer base.”

Every year in February and March, state government employees would need to pay their income tax. As most hadn’t set aside money for it, they would seek a loan from the

bank. Harsh decided to take the next logical step—issue employee credit cards, linked to their basic pay. It was a great success.

Slowly but surely, the bank was becoming more profitable, more healthy.

"I won't say *ki* I turned it around," says Harsh. "It was everybody's contribution."

But there were certain issues that only the MD would have to face. Alone. Come election time and the bank got a new Board of Directors. *Unko dikhana tha yahan kiski chalti hai*. One of the demands was, "We will control where surplus funds are invested." The idea being, to oblige some known persons.

The MD said, "All right. But I am not the decision-maker. I go by what the investment committee decides."

The investment committee consisted of bank managers. Their job was to get quotes from multiple parties.

"If your recommended party gives even one paisa more than other bidders, we will give them the business," was the stand Harsh took.

The Board members who had made the demand attended 3-4 meetings. And then, they stopped coming. They realised that the entire process was fair and transparent. The MD was working in the best interests of the bank. He had no hidden agenda, no personal motive. The vested interests quietly backed off.

"If you have no axe to grind, you can certainly convey your point to the Board, and I did that quite often, to protect the bank's interests."

Of course, one must pick and choose battles carefully. And while being calm and professional at all times, one also has to be firm.

Having won the trust of the Board members, Harsh got 2 extensions. And a degree of freedom. In his 5-and-a-half-year tenure as MD, the Delhi State Co-operative Bank increased its deposits from ₹200 crores to ₹700 crores. What's more, recovery zoomed to more than 70%.

"Cumulative losses were wiped out, in fact we had net reserve of ₹100 crores."

Due to which the Board could declare dividends and provide many other benefits to its members. *Bank ke fayde mein unka bhi fayda tha*. But to run it well, make profits, you need the right manpower. Too often, Boards take the shortcut of appointing their own men in key positions and milking the cow dry.

"For me, it was a very satisfying, hands-on experience of practical banking."

In 2005, Harsh moved back to NABARD. Soon after, he was transferred from Delhi to Calcutta. And this did not suit him at all. The location per se was not an issue, but his wife did not have a transferable job. Moreover, his elderly parents had serious health issues.

"I requested NABARD to transfer me back to Delhi, but they did not agree. So I took study leave to complete my Doctorate."

For the next 2-and-a-half years, Harsh lived with his family in Rohtak. And wrote his dissertation on 'Impact of IT on working of rural bank branches'. He was both a student as well as a teacher, taking classes for the MBA department at Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak.

When he rejoined NABARD in 2008, they once again posted him to Calcutta. This time, Harsh decided to take voluntary retirement.

"*Zindagi ek hai… apne tarike se jiyenge*, that's always been my philosophy!"

> Hamein shuru se sikhaya gaya tha ki aap jitna bhi earn karte ho, uska kuch hissa daan mein dijiye… *there was never a desire to keep acquiring more.*

On 30 April 2008, Harsh left NABARD. 4 days later, he joined the IL&FS group in Jaipur as Senior Vice President. He worked with a vertical called 'IL&FS Water', which developed and implemented projects in the areas of waste water, irrigation and drinking water.

It was a new and exciting experience, working with the private sector. The culture was different—more open, more accountable. There was pressure—and incentive—for individuals to perform, show results. On the other hand, NABARD commanded more respect when interacting with the state government.

"IL&FS was treated differently; I mean, you are a private entity trying to get business. But I had no hesitation or hang-ups."

This was also a period of learning, as Harsh had never worked in infrastructure funding / project management. IL&FS was developing new models, such as BOOT (Build – Own – Operate – Transfer). Having successfully implemented the model in roads, the next step was water.

The first such was the Tirupur Water Supply project, under which 9 Common Effluent Treatment Plants (CETP) were established in the Tirupur textile industries cluster. These were based on the principle of 'Zero Liquid Discharge'. Then came the news that Indian Oil (IOCL) was setting up a refinery at Paradip.

"Large quantities of water are required to refine crude oil… there was no fresh water source near the IOCL plant. So, this became an opportunity."

Harsh did the groundwork for a project that went on to raise ₹700 crores, and set up a pipeline to transport 100 MLD water over a distance of 93 km from the Mahanadi river at Cuttack. The payback period of this—and other infrastructure projects—is 25 years. Anything can happen in this time span… so, how does one mitigate risk?

This was one of the big challenges. Generally, an SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle) or joint venture was created to manage each project. Correct legal documentation with clauses regarding fixed capacity, variable costs and adjudication were key to the financial success of the project. But much more was needed.…

In 2008, the Government of India set up a new entity called India Infrastructure Finance Company Limited (IIFCL). This entity was to raise long-term capital and fund infrastructure projects on BOOT basis.

"I applied and got selected as Chief General Manager, based in Delhi."

Once again Harsh would be working in the area he knew and loved: funding. This time, with the learnings from being on the project side. One of the issues in the infrastructure space is that newly formed SPVs have no reserves. This means that they get a low credit rating and they have to raise money from the bond market at very high interest.

But what if viable projects could be partially guaranteed by an AAA-rated entity such as IIFCL? With this insight, Harsh and his team structured India's first-ever 'credit enhancement deal' along with the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A rare instance of investors looking beyond the usual horizon of 5 years.

"With this guarantee, interest rates became more affordable, and in the long run, we see the enlarging and deepening of the bond markets."

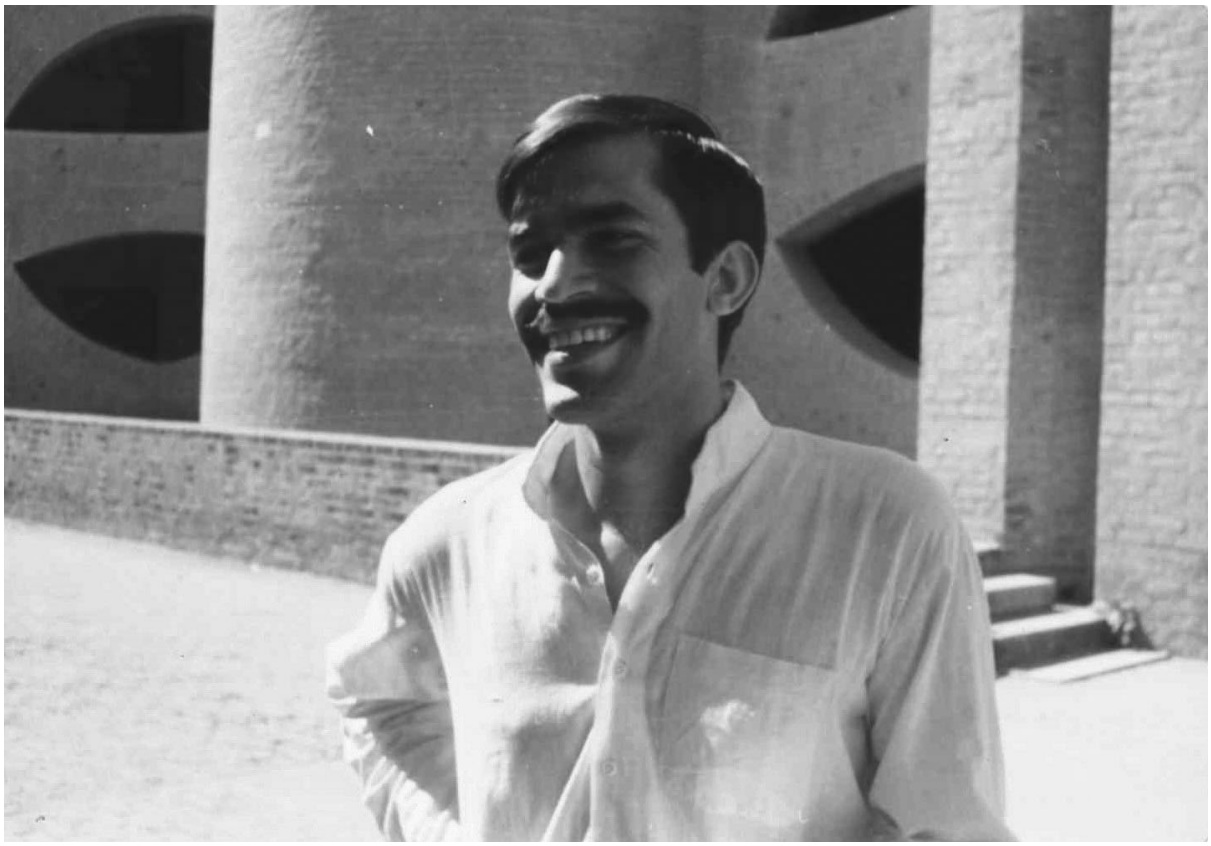
The first deal was structured for GMR Jadcherla Expressway, an SPV which had the mandate from National Highway Authority of India to construct 53 km of road between Farukhnagar and Jadcherla in Andhra Pradesh. With the IIFCL guarantee, GMR enhanced its rating from A to AA, and could thus borrow money at lower interest.

Although a government entity, IIFCL was more like a start-up. An empty canvas which could be painted with vibrant colours. Harsh was enjoying his role and responsibilities. Within 6 months, he was elevated to the Board as Executive Director, and soon after, to Chairman and Managing Director.

One morning, he saw an advertisement in the newspaper: ‘NABARD invites applications for post of Chairman’. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. The posting would be in Mumbai, which meant moving from Delhi, away from the family. But they were supportive.

“The charm of coming back as head of an entity which was your starting institution was worth it…”

It was the return of the prodigal son when Harsh Bhanwala took charge of NABARD on 18 December 2013. The irony was that he may not have become Chairman, had he not left the organisation. He might well have been a Chief General Manager, like most of his batchmates.…



Would my younger self be proud of the way I led my life?

When you join an organisation, you think, “If I was at the top, this is what I would change!” If and when you reach that position, do you still have that zest? Harsh Bhanwala clearly does. In the 4 years he’s been at the helm, he has deepened and broadened the work of NABARD.

“Credit cannot be given in isolation… we also have to look at the big picture.”

Take water: India has 18% of the world’s population and 4% of the world’s fresh water. 85% of this water is consumed in agriculture.

“To solve India’s water problem, we have to invest and we have to transform irrigation. This is a cause we have been championing.”

Recently, the Government of India set up a dedicated Long Term Irrigation Fund (LTIF) with an initial corpus of ₹20,000 crores (as announced in Budget 2016–17). NABARD is a key partner. The aim is to fund and fast track the implementation of incomplete major and medium irrigation projects.

"We have disbursed ₹9,000 crores to projects which were languishing for over a decade… with cost over-run as high as 1,000 times!"

The government has helped reduce the borrowing cost from 8% to 6%. All projects are closely monitored by the Ministry of Water Resources, as well as NABARD. In Budget 2017, a micro-irrigation fund with the corpus of ₹5,000 crores has been set up, with the goal of 'more crop per drop' for small farmers.

As an apex institution, NABARD has always worked through banks to implement policies and disburse credit. Now, there is a more hands-on approach.

"We are helping state governments up front, to solve problems. Of course, NABARD still works through banks, but that is not the only route."

In every problem, lies an opportunity. If you look at the GDP numbers, over the years, the share of agriculture has come down. But within agriculture, the fastest-growing segment is milk. However, except for Amul, no other federation is growing. Most co-operative milk plants are over 30 years old and outdated.

Well, the government has now set up a 'Dairy Processing & Infrastructure Development Fund', with an outlay of ₹10,881 crores over 10 years. This is to be used for the modernisation and expansion of co-operative sector milk plants. It was NABARD which had suggested the creation of this fund.

All this work is important, but every once in a while Harsh Bhanwala reminds himself about what is *truly* important.

"I still remember the face of that lady in Gorakhpur and I wonder… how much has her life improved?"

One of NABARD's flagship programs, which addresses the issues of rural women, is the self-help group (SHG)–bank linkage program, which was started in 1992. It is the world's largest microfinance program, though it differs when it comes to implementation.

"Grameen Bank of Bangladesh said, 'Credit to everybody—it is a right'. While we said, 'Credit to those who can handle it'… not to all."

Under this scheme, for the first 6 months, the SHG members put in their own money. Once they have demonstrated the ability to save and manage resources, it is augmented by banks. This experiment began with just 500 SHGs in the first year. The scheme has been a runaway success, with over 80 lakh SHGs now under its umbrella.

As each group has an average membership of 10, that's 8 crore (80 million) beneficiaries. 90% of these groups consist only of women.

"The beauty of this is it provides doorstep banking facilities… *ajivika hoti hai, social action hota hai, prohibition pe kaam karti hain, nari utthan pe kaam karti hain*."

> *I couldn't straight away improve my client relationship or service at the counter… but I had to show, there is a future, there is hope!*

The members get individual loans that are 4 times the amount they have saved. So they can use it for any purpose they wish. The total amount of savings by these SHGs is a staggering ₹37,000 crores, while the outstanding loans to them are ₹57,000 crores.

In economics, we learn that surplus over consumption is equal to 'savings'. But do these women really have that luxury?

"This is their thrift," says Harsh. "*Pet kaat ke bachati hain*."

How to do *more* for these strong and determined women, was the question on Harsh Bhanwala's mind. Numbers revealed that, of 80 lakh SHGs, only 45 lakh had availed of a

loan. The answer came from technology—digitisation of SHGs, through a portal called EShakti (https://eshakti.nabard.org/).

Details of each SHG and its members are captured: mobile number, Aadhaar card, activities of the group, money deposited and withdrawn. Based on this, an SHG gets a credit rating. Bank managers can now see which are the A-rated and B-rated groups in their local area—sitting at their desks.

"You see there is already a lot of pressure on the Branch Manager: Jan Dhan, Atal pension, and what not. So we have to make it easier for them."

The pilot project was kicked off in July 2015 with Ramgarh district, a backward area in Jharkhand. This resulted in a huge improvement in linkage. A second pilot was conducted in Dhule (Maharashtra), followed by 23 districts. Then, a national rollout on pilot basis, with 100 districts.

As of March 2018, more than 2.7 lakh SHGs (30 lakh women) have been covered.

"Another problem is that, out of 13 crore land-holdings, 85% is the small farmer, *jise hum kehte hain chhota kisan*."

This chhota kisan has very small production capacity, so he sells to the middleman and makes very little money. But what if all these small farmers were to come together—like milk co-operatives? Not only can they sell at better prices, but they can also get fertiliser and hire tractors collectively.

It is with this in mind that NABARD has formed over 2,000 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)—many being registered as producer companies and run by farmers themselves.[2] These will be tracked through a dedicated portal and given other necessary support. Because setting up is easy; it is running the company on a day-to-day basis that is the challenge.

NABARD's Institute for Rural Development in Lucknow has started training programs for CEOs of these producer organisations.

"We call them CEOs, but they are local fellows only—those who are willing to learn more about their own operations and help out."

The problem with most cooperatives is lack of monitoring and accountability to members. Hence, there is a higher chance of fraud, or *ghotala*.

Harsh observes, "*Jahan pe member education achchi hai wahan ye nahi hoga…* that is why when we form a producer company, we link it to a sanstha/NGO."

NABARD works with local NGOs all over the country; it trains their staff to handhold the farmers and report on the kisan-led company's progress. This has worked very well in many cases. Giving the bank confidence to set a goal of 10,000 producer organisations in the next 3–5 years.

What's more, a subsidiary company of NABARD has been converted into Nabkisan Finance Ltd—its focus is solely producer companies and their unique funding requirements. Because ordinary bank loans are not easily available to them.

"*Shuru shuru mein*, such organisations need grant funding, *ki bhai kaam chaalu ho jaaye*. This must be followed by subordinate debt, with a long payback period."

Like a *gulab ka phool* needs the right *maali*, a producer company needs careful and patient nurturing. To bloom and spread its fragrance.

One recent innovation which is very close to the Chairman's heart is 'Joint Liability Groups'. This is a mechanism to provide institutional credit to the small farmer who does not own the land he cultivates. Members of the group—all from the same village—cross-guarantee each other's loans.

"This mechanism has worked; already more than 12 lakh groups have come up and recoveries are good!"

Harsh sees the future of agriculture in polyhouses, micro-irrigation, precision

agriculture. But, he says, farmers are just not investing enough in these areas. While crop loans are growing, term loans to create infrastructure lag behind. And that is something the bank is trying to address.

At the macro level, NABARD supports research in the field of climate change. Because agriculture and rural areas will be hugely affected by this phenomenon.

> *If you have your own vested interest, you can't stand up anywhere, that's the first fundamental principle when you deal with public institutions.*

"Even nature will not favour the poor unless they do agriculture in a smart manner: organic smartness, carbon smartness, energy smartness, knowledge smartness!"

It's a pretty vast canvas, and it keeps expanding. This ambition is possible only because the bank itself is extremely sound. In the era of bad debts and write-offs, NABARD has zero net NPAs (non-performing assets). And the balance sheet has grown from ₹213,000 crores to ₹354,000 crores during Harsh Bhanwala's tenure.

Like IDBI, SIDBI and EXIM, NABARD is an autonomous institution that has always had more of a corporate culture than a sarkari one.

"I have an excellent team working with me, but the challenge is how to balance old and new ways of thinking so we can become problem-solvers."

A bank is traditionally dominated by bean-counters. The accounts, finance and risk departments implement rules and regulations, provide checks and balances. At the same time, there are departments which must think and act like social entrepreneurs. They need more freedom to flourish and deliver results.

Outside the office, Harsh has a passion for fitness and reading. Both of which he indulges in, in the morning hours.

"*Bachpan ke jo sanskaar hain*… I still follow that discipline of waking up early."

In Mumbai, Harsh is one of the lucky ones who can walk from his home in BKC to his office, also in BKC, and to the MCA club for his daily dose of exercise.

However, his wife is still teaching in Rohtak and his kids are scattered across the world: the eldest daughter is working in the US, the younger one is doing her MBBS in Manipal, and his son is at Delhi University studying Economics (Hons). Twice a month, Harsh makes a weekend trip to Delhi and Rohtak.

"We call ourselves a 'digital family'. *Roz raat ko Facetime / Skype / WhatsApp se ek doosre se baat ho jaati hai aur hum updated rehte hain*."

Life is simple, life is good. As Chairman of NABARD, there are certain perks and privileges. Salaams and a sense of importance. But Harsh is very pragmatic.

"Sarkaar mein thoda hota hai… VIP treatment. Lekin agar aap humility banaye rakhein to achcha rehta hai… baad mein dikkat nahin hoti hai!"

Power and designation come, they go. You play your part in the grand design of the Universe. And one day, gracefully let go.

Your name might get recorded in history, or it may go unsung. But the impact of your words, deeds, thoughts and intentions is felt.

You did your best—and that's all you can possibly do.

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[1] Now known as the Mahatma Bhagatfulsingh University for Women, Sonepat district,

Haryana.

[2] Producer companies are registered entities, SHGs are not.

Saare jahan se achcha Hindostan hamara…
Usme ek chhota sa yogdaan hamara.

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

Dekho, kuch bhi paane ke liye, vyakti mein drad nischchay hona chahiye… nischay ke bina safalta nahin (To achieve anything in life, you have to be determined and fully committed).

Nischay banaye rakhne ke liye aapko satat prayaas karna padta hai. Kyunki nischay tootna koi mushkil kaam nahin hai (Commitment is something you should have to keep trying, keep making efforts. Because it's very easy to get side-tracked).

Every morning I go for a walk, and every morning the first round is a drag. But after 2–3 rounds, you get into a rhythm and start enjoying it. You are determined to finish.… So, inertia is in each of us. And it takes you in a direction opposite to what you really want.

Constant effort is necessary… and you can't do it alone. You need friends and colleagues who support you, respect you. *Unse acchhe sambandh banaye rakhein.*

Even as you make constant efforts, be aware of the organisational realities. 'Smart work' is as important as hard work. Seek out opportunities.

Satat prayaas ke liye zaroori hai aapka active mind ho aur physically robust ho. Aap challenges ko bear karne mein saksham ho (To stay determined and focused you need an active mind and a physically fit body. So that you can meet challenges head-on. And don't give up when it is the time to rise up).

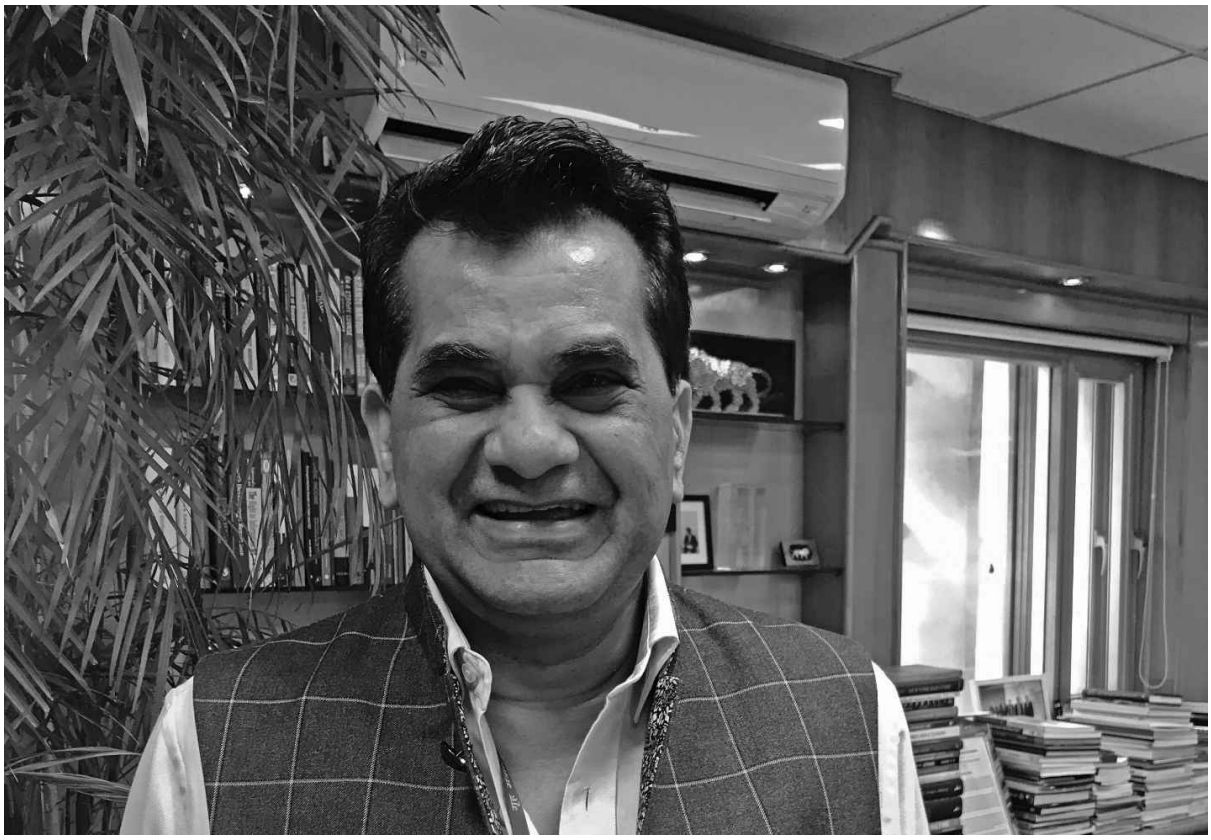
Spend 20–25 minutes each day on yourself, doing exercise or yoga. *Prabhu ne adbhut shareer diya hai*. Use this precious gift (the body) to be fully alive, and then to solve the problems around you—within your organisation and in the larger society.

It's the simple lessons of childhood: stay active, stay positive and smile often!

Affinity matters, relationships matter… analysis is important but no data can tell you how to conduct yourself, how to manage others, how to achieve outcomes. That is the art of management. *Jiske liye zindagi bhar satat prayaas karna hoga!*

Section 3
SEWA

A government officer has tremendous power, which can lead to transformation. If exercised boldly and effectively. Doing that is true service to the nation and its people.



AMITABH KANT

NITI Aayog

Most see the IAS as a cushy job, a few—very few—see it as a chance to make a difference. From the time he was a Sub-Collector in the Malabar Coast, Amitabh Kant saw himself as a ‘change-maker’. That mindset continued throughout his career, in every posting, in every department, in every government. For, where there is a will, there is a way.

SOFT POWER

Amitabh Kant is a man who speaks softly. But, his voice gets heard.

In 38 years of service, he's worked with every kind of politician—communist, capitalist, socialist. He does what needs to be done, that's all that matters.

As a young IAS officer in the Kerala cadre, he came up with innovative ideas to boost the earnings of local fishermen. And initiated a community-led funding for the construction of Calicut airport.

Driven by the same passion and purpose, as an entrepreneur.

He convinced the finest creative minds to work on 'God's Own Country' and 'Incredible India'. And got stodgy ministers to buy into that vision.

Far trickier to deal with than any venture capital investor.

We often read about IAS officers who try to 'do something' and get transferred or sidelined. Amitabh Kant isn't one of them. He shows you another way.

Challenge the status quo. But do it with positivity, with humility.

I think it is no coincidence that Amitabh Kant loves art, and artists. A man with such inclinations cannot be hard and unyielding. Or, too fixed in his ideas.

Because art demands openness. It creates expansion. It speaks the language of the soul.

There are different kinds of artists—some choose paper, some choose cloth. Occasionally, there is one who chooses the vast canvas of government.

With bold and confident strokes, painting a picture of a new India.

Amitabh Kant was born in Varanasi, to a family that valued knowledge.

"My father was a judge while my mother was a professor of Political Science in Banaras Hindu University (BHU). She later taught in the US on a Fulbright scholarship…"

This was highly unusual, in the mid-1960s, and certainly, his mother was a strong model for Amitabh and his brother Ravi Kant.

When Amitabh was in Class 4, his father was transferred to Delhi. There, he joined Modern School, Barakhamba Road. Principal Mr M N Kapoor's philosophy was—'be an all-rounder'. Do well in academics, enjoy sports and get completely involved in one extracurricular activity.

"For me, that meant playing a lot of cricket and doing theatre! In my final year, I played the lead in a wonderful musical presentation on the history of India."

After completing Economic Honours at St Stephen's College, there was no doubt in Amitabh's mind about 'what next'. His goal was the Indian Administrative Service. To improve his chances of entry, Amitabh enrolled in JNU for an MA in International Relations (it was one of the easier-to-score subjects!).

While doing his MA, he appeared for the UPSC examinations and got selected for the IAS in 1980. But then came a rude shock. The pucca North Indian got allotted to 'Kerala cadre'.

It wasn't my first choice… in fact, it was my last choice. I was heartbroken.

Nevertheless, in September 1981, a young man boarded the Kerala Express which took 48 hours to reach Trivandrum from Delhi. During his training stint in Thrissur, he got a glimpse of how different the state of Kerala was. With a Marxist government at the helm and very strong labour unions.

When you got down at the railway station, even if you were carrying your own luggage, the union would demand 'nokku-coolie' (payment for merely watching you lift your own luggage). It was quite a culture shock.

In 1982, Amitabh Kant got his first posting in Tellichery sub-division, the traditional bastion of the Malabar region. Extending from Kannur to Kasargod, Tellicherry is steeped in history. The house allotted to the Sub-Collector was made by Lord Wellesley (who later became the Duke of Wellington). It stands on a hillock, overlooking the Arabian Sea.

"Slowly, I started falling in love with Kerala. Its people, its culture, its natural beauty…"

And there was excitement, in the possibilities that came with the job.

The town of Tellicherry had a fish market located right at the centre, creating a huge stink. One of the first decisions the new Sub-Collector took was to relocate it to the beach area. The clean-up drive did not stop there, he took it further. Widening of roads, removal of encroachment—tough actions, sometimes unpleasant.

> *People who do well in life are not those who do well in academics alone but those who have varied interests.*

But when you are young and enthusiastic, you don't stop to think about the

consequences.

"I got away with it because the people of Tellicherry supported me…"

And somewhere that seed got planted in a young civil servant's mind. That good work *is* possible, it is appreciated.

One evening, there was news of a man falling into the sea. The Sub-Collector rushed to the spot, oversaw his rescue and sent the man to a local hospital. The district administration gave an assurance that it would foot the bill. But the doctor delayed the treatment simply because he had not received advance payment, and as a result, the patient died.

The Sub-Collector called the drug inspector and got the doctor's clinic raided. A number of spurious drugs and expired medicines were found. A case was registered.

"It became a big issue. The doctors all ganged up. Saying that, as a young Sub-Collector, I had exceeded my authority."

Doctors then took a petition to the minister, who stayed all further action. Amitabh Kant was asked to furnish an explanation. Meanwhile, another crisis developed. A group of Naxalites surrounded the clinic and began conducting a 'public trial'. The Sub-Collector rushed to the spot and rescued the doctor.

Ultimately, despite the minister's intervention, the doctor had to stop practicing in Tellicherry. The local population simply refused to give in.

It was another great lesson on 'people power' and public awareness in the state of Kerala.

A softer and sweeter side of this stint was the Sub-Collector's initiative to hold a 'Tellicherry carnival'. The idea being to bring together Hindus, Muslims and Christians through culture.

At a personal level, the young Sub-Collector and his wife Ranjeeta made some life-long friends in the little coastal town. Many happy evenings were spent in the company of Moosa and his wife Faiza, at their beautiful colonial-style mansion[1] overlooking the Arabian Sea. Enjoying some of the great Moplah dishes: mussels, clams, oysters, fish parathas.

"My wife got her first lessons in Kerala cooking from a renowned culinary expert—Faiza!"

The next posting came in September 1984, with Amitabh Kant taking charge as Managing Director of Matsyafed, an apex federation of fishermen's welfare societies. In fact, it was a start-up—registered just 6 months earlier—with the aim of improving the lives of traditional fisherfolk. Through both economic and social development.

"I suddenly felt that I *had* to do something… many, many ideas bubbled in my head…"

A sharp definition of the problem is the first step towards a solution. The problem of the fisherman could be summed up in a single word—'middleman'. The fisherman earned a measly 25% of the market price of his catch. The fish trade was dominated by 14–15 big players who controlled the entire market.

To eliminate the middleman, the concept of 'beach level' auctioning was introduced. These auctions enabled the intersection of demand and supply, such that the actual producer got a much higher return for his daily catch. What's more, bank accounts were opened for fishermen, so they could receive direct payments.

Back then, opening an account was a tedious exercise which took 7–8 months. But it was an important requirement. With a bank account, fishermen could avail of a loan to procure new fiberglass boats. These boats were fitted with outboard motors and 'disco nets' and could go much further into the sea. Increasing the quantity of fish caught.

"I spent a lot of time going from one fishing village to another, speaking to the fishermen, forming self-help groups… getting their buy-in for the project."

But how did a St Stephen's graduate from North India win the trust of Malayali

fishermen? With the help of a secret ‘superpower’. Early on, Amitabh Kant had mastered the local language. His public speeches were not in English or Hindi but fluent Malayalam. This fascinated the aam junta, and made him an ‘insider’.

Of course, it was the merits of the scheme which mattered the most.

For every ₹100 earned from the sale of fish at the auction, ₹50 would be transferred to the fisherman’s bank account. The remaining 50% went toward loan[2] repayment.

How a project is financially structured can make it, or break it. This would become one of the cornerstones of many future projects led by Amitabh Kant.

> *I’ve come to the conclusion that when officers are enterprising, when they want to do good things, they get a lot of support.*

Another issue faced—specifically by fisherwomen—was transporting the catch from coastal towns to cities. Travelling by the regular bus with their fishing baskets was a pain point. Therefore, Matsyafed started a special bus only for fisherwomen, with space for their baskets at the back. This became popular, and subsequently, several such buses were introduced.

“Those were exciting days… when I look back I think they were the best days of my life!”

In 1987, Amitabh Kant moved to the Ministry of Commerce in New Delhi. He requested the posting on humanitarian grounds, after the untimely death of his father. During this 4-year stint, he did some interesting work with tea, coffee, rubber and marine products. This stint gave the young officer deep insights and learnings related to India’s plantation crops.

In particular, the role of research and development in enhancing productivity and how to create value addition through retail marketing.

Then, it was back to the home cadre for a brief stint as Commissioner, Rural Development. This was an exciting phase of developing Self Help Groups (SHGs) and building marketing linkages for the produce of rural women. This was an area in which Kerala took an early lead and became a model for the rest of India.[3]

In June 1992, Amitabh Kant took charge as District Collector, Calicut. This was a posting where he made a huge impact, a fact that is gratefully acknowledged by locals, even today.

> *Calicut was the first airport ever built on user’s development fee and through private–public partnership… So it was a very unique project.*

Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in the year 1498. It used to be said that if da Gama were to come back, he would find the city in exactly the same condition as he’d left it! The roads were narrow, there was no modern urban planning. What struck Amitabh Kant was the lack of public spaces and recreational areas. That became project number 1.

At the heart of Calicut lies the Mananchira maidan, which had been heavily encroached. The District Collector used his powers and got more than 100-odd illegal structures removed. At the same time, the maidan was beautified using the traditional red

laterite stone of the Malabar region. It was beautifully lit up and the highlight was a unique musical fountain.

"Mananchira maidan became the 'lungs' of the city… the place where everybody would come, sit and relax in the evening!"

The District Collector also undertook the difficult exercise of widening the narrow roads of Calicut. 26 roads were widened and the Calicut bypass was developed at great personal risk. In fact, he gave orders to demolish the illegal buildings of the Irrigation Department and the State Bank of India.

Malayalis love legal battles and since he refused to bow to pulls and pressures, at one point, Amitabh Kant was facing several contempt of court cases in the Kerala High Court.

There was tremendous pressure to withdraw the anti-encroachment drive in the city that was full of illegal occupation of revenue land.

Fortunately, there was tremendous support from the local public, as well as the media. There were phenomenal advantages to working in a highly literate and aware society. There was also support from then Chief Minister K Karunakaran, who ensured that there was no political interference. Ultimately, the cases were dropped.

And in the process, Calicut got better roads and a much required bypass. Which stand the city in good stead even today.

But the real game-changer was the modernisation and upgradation of Calicut airport. Located on top of a hill, it had a runway which could only accommodate smaller aircraft. Hence, locals working in Saudi Arabia and Oman had to travel via Bombay. This meant harassment by immigration and custom officials and touts. And one night spent in transit.

The Minister for Civil Aviation, Ghulam Nabi Azad, met Karunakaran and expressed his inability to expand the airport, due to lack of funds.

"Why don't we raise our own resources?" was Amitabh Kant's suggestion to the CM. It had never been done before—at least not in Kerala—but that was all the more reason to try!

The Malayali community working in the Gulf was galvanised—they readily agreed to contribute, as many of them came from the Malabar region. To channelise these funds, an SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle), called the Malabar International Airport Development Society, was formed.

Amitabh Kant—the first CEO of the society[4]—proposed another novel means to finance the airport. Calicut airport became the first in the country to impose a 'User Development Fee' of ₹500 from each passenger. This money was used to repay the ₹120-crore loan from HUDCO which funded the expansion of the runway, to 9,000 feet.

From this new airport, people from the Malabar region could fly directly to Saudi, Oman, Qatar and return straight to their homes. Travel to the Gulf became simple and hassle-free.

As Chairman of the local Haj committee, the District Collector was also able to route all pilgrims from surrounding districts via Calicut airport. Over 100 flights began operating to the Gulf every week.

In the late 1980s, Calicut airport became a unique example of public participation in an infrastructure project. It inspired the development of Cochin airport as a private project and, later, the creation of Kannur airport. Today, Kerala is the only state in India with 4 functional international airports!

During this period, Calicut also witnessed a cultural revival. Next to the Mananchira maidan stood a ramshackle building with a forgotten library. Amitabh Kant had this demolished and rebuilt, with some out-of-the-box thinking. The lower floor now had shops, paying handsome rent. Thus financing a new world-class library, housed on the upper floors.

Calicut had produced some of the greatest Malayalam writers—Basheer, Pottekkatt,

Thikodiyan, M T Vasudevan Nair. The local people felt immense pride in Malayalam literature and authors. The library soon became a meeting point for all writers and intellectuals of the city.

Going beyond brick and mortar, the District Collector initiated a festival called ‘Malabar Mahotsav’. Well-known musicians and artists such as Amjad Ali Khan, Zakir Hussain, Allah Rakha, Shiv Kumar Sharma and Sivamani performed to huge crowds—mostly locals—who sat on the beach on dhurries. A confluence of cultures at its best.

One of the most challenging moments as District Collector, Calicut, was handling the law and order situation on 6 December 1992. The day the Babri Masjid was demolished. Tensions were running high and the army had been called in to maintain the peace. The District Collector held meetings with various community leaders.

“I decided we should do something different, something unique, to defuse the situation…”

> *It is not about continuing with the system, but the imprint you leave behind—that is critical.*

Amitabh Kant invited all the leading artists of Kerala to Calicut, to express the idea of ‘communal harmony’ through the paintbrush. A 100-meter long canvas was procured and set up on the beach. The event was to be held on a Sunday, at 11 am. 2 days before that, Amitabh Kant got hold of M F Husain’s personal telephone number.

The legendary artist accepted the last-minute invitation to come to Calicut and paint. His presence and persona electrified the atmosphere. Thousands of citizens gathered to watch artists—led by Husain—fill the canvas with images of peace and harmony. Subsequently, there was no untoward incident.

On a different trip: with Prime Minister Vajpayee, in God's Own Country

During this visit, M F Husain was also inspired to paint a canvas with 3 elephants and a bird. The 2 grown elephants symbolised Amitabh Kant and his wife Ranjeeta, the baby elephant their older daughter (Vedica), and the bird, the newborn (Vanshica). In the years to come, the painter would revisit Kerala and make it his muse.

"M F Husain always stayed with us… he became like a family member."

After 3 impactful years in Calicut, Amitabh Kant was deputed as MD of Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC). The highlight of this stint was several infrastructure projects such as the BSES power project, Vallarpadam container terminal and Southern gas grid. All done in the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) mode.

He was also instrumental in building a second bridge[5] connecting the Cochin mainland and Willingdon Island. Mattancherry was the first build-operate-transfer bridge in the state. Feasibility studies were undertaken and the project was bid out to Gammon India, for ₹25.80 crores.

Realising that Kerala's core competency was in tourism—not in hardcore industries—Amitabh Kant started financing and supporting tourism entrepreneurs. Most of the experimental resorts of Kerala developed as a consequence of this initiative.

Call it luck, or call it providence, in September 1997 Amitabh Kant became Secretary, Tourism, Government of Kerala. This posting would change the very course of his career…

Today, Kerala is a celebrated destination. But rewind to the '80s and '90s, Kashmir and Rajasthan were the main attraction, for both Indians and foreigners.

So, how did this tiny coastal state become a tourism powerhouse?

The story as we know it began in 1989. That's when the Kerala Tourism department gave Mudra Communications the task of developing a promotional campaign to attract tourists. Many different taglines were suggested, including 'Where the Season Never Ends'

and ‘Paradise Untouched’.

It was Creative Director Walter Mendis who came up with the now-iconic phrase ‘God’s Own Country’.

The then Tourism Secretary, K Jayakumar, loved the idea. The challenge was to sell it to the minister-in-charge—a hardcore communist. The criticisms were many…

“Why are you targeting only pilgrims?”

“How can you own God?”

“What is the rest of the world then—the devil’s?”

But putting aside his personal beliefs, comrade P Sreenivasan gave the green signal. And the rest is history…

By 1995, foreign tourist arrivals had more than doubled, while domestic tourism went up 6x. Local entrepreneurs rose to the challenge. And they did it in unique Kerala style.

One such innovation was the Surya Samudra Beach Garden near Kovalam, the brainchild of Prof Klaus Schleusner of IIT Madras. Who painfully dismantled, assembled and restored 200 / 300-year-old *tharavads* (traditional wooden houses), to create a luxury resort in the midst of nature.

Around the same time, CEO of CGH Earth Group, Jose Dominic, set up Coconut Lagoon in Kumarakom and Spice Village in Thekkady, using traditional architecture methods and local craftsmen.[6]

> *We moved away from blindly aping the West… Kerala resorts are a product of local entrepreneurship and local heritage.*

“Kerala was the first state that actually went back to its roots… instead of building the same kind of 5-star hotels you see everywhere!”

To add a touch of modernity (and luxury), Dominic also developed pool villas on his properties.

But the real game-changer was the introduction of houseboats. For centuries, *kettuvollams* had plied in the backwaters of Kerala, as goods carriers. Enterprising locals adapted these rice boats for tourism. Commercial houseboat cruises began operating in Allepey in 1991 and soon became a big draw for tourists.

The tourism department also played a major role, by building terminal buildings, beautiful signage and implementing zoning regulations.

“We said that, in the backwaters, you will not have a single building which is higher than a coconut tree!”

By the time Amitabh Kant took charge, much work had been done but much work remained to be done. While the numbers looked good, they did not tell the whole story. A significant number of foreign visitors, especially from the UK, were coming in on charter flights. These tourists wanted cheap hotels, cheap booze and had little regard for the local culture.

“My first challenge was—how do you take Kerala up the value chain, how do you attract the well-heeled traveller who will stay longer and spend more…”

The goal was to establish ‘God’s Own Country’ as a global brand. This could not be done by the government alone, it had to be a public-private partnership.

The tourism department worked with private players to bring traditional art forms such as Kathakali, Thaiyyam and the martial art Kalaripayattu to the forefront. Ayurveda was promoted as ‘not just a massage’ but a treatment regimen of 21 days. And Kerala’s unique

coconut- and curry-based cuisine—appam and fish molee—was given pride of place.

A unique project was undertaken in partnership with the forest department in the Periyar tiger reserve. Under an eco-tourism development program, 21 former poachers were trained to operate as forest guides. It took a great deal of positive thinking and systematic monitoring, to make this out-of-the-box idea work.

Another interesting concept was 'tree huts', developed by locals in the hilly Wayanad area. What Kerala Tourism did was showcase such novel travel experiences to influencers.

"We invited editors from top magazine like *Condé Nast Traveller* and *National Geographic* to the state… to experience 'God's Own Country' for themselves."

The tipping point came in November '99, when Nat Geo Traveller's millennium edition listed Kerala as one of 50 must-see destinations of a lifetime. The writer concluded that the state is a 'paradise found'–not only for being exotic and beautiful, but also because it was intellectually and socially equal to any First World country.

'God's Own Country' had finally arrived on the global tourism map.

Now was the time to beat the drum and tell the world, through a well-crafted mass media campaign. But where would the funds for this come from? Amitabh Kant made his case and took it to the Finance Secretary, the Chief Secretary, the Tourism Minister, Finance Minister, Chief Minister.

He knew that, without consensus, it would never work. But creating consensus is not easy. You have to fight on files, and fight orally.

"By 'fighting' I mean you have to convince them… and you can only do that when you have the passion within you."

It helps to have data to back you up. A study by Tata Consultancy Services on the 'impact of tourism' was crucial in this regard. One of its key findings was that tourism had created approximately 4.5 lakh jobs. For a state which had barely any industry, this was a welcome development. Even for a Marxist government.

"Go ahead, be as creative as you want," said Tourism Minister E Chandrashekharan Nair.

Now, to execute a truly inspirational campaign, you need a truly inspired artist.

Amitabh Kant had set his sights on the brilliant cinematographer Santosh Sivan.

He knew full well that Kerala Tourism did not have the budget Sivan usually worked with.

> *People say that IAS doesn't perform but one of the challenges is that officers get very short tenures.*

But he also knew that, first and foremost, an artist works from the heart. So when they met at the Taj coffee shop in Mumbai, Amitabh Kant made an emotional appeal.

"You are from Kerala, can you help us showcase Kerala to the world?"

It took just 20 minutes to convince Sivan to drop everything and come to Kerala and shoot. He filmed for 20 days, at 20 locations with a 100-strong crew, during the magical monsoons. The result was a minute-long ad film, 'Water Colours by God', and several shorter ones, capturing Kerala's greenery, serenity, culture, cuisine and Ayurveda.

The films were made on a shoestring budget of ₹70 lakhs, with an equal amount of media spend. It was the first time ever that an ad film had been commissioned by a state tourism department, and it ran on TV, in cinemas and online. The telephone number mentioned at the end of the film generated a huge number of enquiries.

In an era when there was no Tripadvisor or booking.com, travel agents played a big

role in tourism choices. Hence, Kerala Tourism began participating in World Travel Marts. This was again a public-private partnership, with a clear allocation of roles.

"The government will act as the facilitator and catalyst and market the destination, entrepreneurs will create unique experiences."

It was this win-win collaboration which resulted in the Kerala Travel Mart in October 2000. Spread over 4 days, the event brought together more than 150 'sellers' of tourism products and more than 300 'buyers' from all over the world. This went on to become an annual event generating business for everyone, from large hotel chains to small homestays.

Kerala Tourism also did road shows in cities like Surat, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad and Bangalore, targeting the local business community and IT crowd. 'Come to Kerala in the monsoon for the benefits of Ayurveda'[7] was another strategy, to attract tourists during the 'low season' (it worked!).

Then, on the eve of New Year, 2001, God's Own Country received a very special visitor…

> *My argument against 'lowest bid' was simple—in a creative field if you pay peanuts, you will get monkeys.*

It was a Sunday afternoon when Amitabh Kant was jolted from an afternoon siesta by a phone call. The voice at the other end said, "Call from the Prime Minister's office."
Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, was on the line.

"Mr Vajpayee will be coming to Kerala for a holiday… You are to make all arrangements."

It was a purely personal visit, no agenda, no meetings with politicians or ministers.

The Prime Minister landed in Kochi the day after Christmas and flew to Kumarakom. Where he was to spend 7 relaxing days in a century-old colonial mansion called Baker's Bungalow.[8]

On one of those days, Amitabh Kant had organised a trip through the backwaters on a houseboat. Since the PM was fond of music, Jagjit Singh was to perform that evening.

Over dinner, Brajesh Mishra leaned towards Prime Minister Vajpayee and remarked, "This young officer has done a lot for Kerala tourism… *isko humein Delhi lana chahiye, isse hame India tourism karvana chahiye* (We should call him to Delhi to do India tourism)."

The PM looked at Amitabh Kant and asked, "*Aapne Delhi posting ke liye apply kiya hai* (Have you applied for a posting to Delhi)?"

When Kant replied in the negative, the PM added, in jest, "*Aap apply mat kijiyega kyunki Brajesh Mishraji aapko tourism ke badle women and child welfare me bhej denge* (Don't apply because Brajesh Mishra will send you to women and child welfare instead of tourism)."

Everybody had a good laugh and the matter was forgotten.

14 months later, Kant did apply for the Central pool and was to join the Finance Ministry. It was another sleepy weekend when he got a call from the PMO.

Once again it was Brajesh Mishra on the line, but for a different reason.

"*Tumhe wo baat yaad hai… jab Vajpayee saab aaye the wahan* (Do you remember what we had discussed when Vajpayee saab visited Kerala)?"

What came next was a complete surprise. Amitabh Kant was to join the Ministry of Tourism, as Joint Secretary.

"But sir… there is no vacancy in that department," said Kant.

"*Usse tumhe kya lena dena hai*," came the reply. (You don't need to worry about that.)

The existing officer was transferred, a vacancy was created.

That's how Amitabh Kant ended up in the right place at the right time—and with the right skillset—to pull off the Ministry of Tourism's most successful campaign: 'Incredible India'.

I wonder if this kind of thing happens often. Does the good work done by an officer at the state level get recognised… does that officer get a chance to use his or her experience at the national level? The answer, sadly, is 'no'. It was plain luck that PM Vajpayee went to Kerala and Amitabh Kant's work was noticed by the powers-that-be.

"I've come to the conclusion that, along with hard work, destiny plays a major role in life…"

It must also be noted that Amitabh Kant's 3-and-a-half year stint at Kerala Tourism was a long one, by government standards. What's more, there was continuity of purpose. The good work done by the previous Tourism Secretary, K Jayakumar, was amplified by Amitabh Kant. And ably taken forward by the dynamic T Balakrishnan and Dr. V Venu.

Meanwhile, it was time to move on…

Taking charge as Union Tourism Joint Secretary in July 2001, the first task on Amitabh Kant's plate was to organise a chief ministers' conference. One day before the event, the Twin Towers were brought down by Al Qaeda in New York City. As the world watched in shock, more unfortunate events followed.

On 13 December 2001, there was an attack on Parliament House, which led to tension on the Indo–Pak border. And there was war in Afghanistan. Several embassies issued travel advisories against visiting India. As a result, occupancy in hotels had slipped to 25–30%, while overall tourist arrivals declined sharply. It was a crisis of epic proportions.

So, the Tourism Ministry offered to buy ads in the brochures produced by these companies.

"You can buy the whole brochure," they shrugged. "But no one will travel to India…"

Even Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand had cut back on their advertising. Sentiment was weak—the travel industry was in a meltdown all across the globe.

But where there is a problem, there is opportunity. It was at the peak of this crisis that Amitabh Kant decided to launch the now-iconic 'Incredible India' campaign.

In the year 2002, India had 18 tourism offices abroad. But there was no positioning, common branding or clear, precise message. While one foreign office was selling 'Spiritual India', another was promoting 'Cultural India'.

Unlike the slick campaigns by Malaysia ('Truly Asia') and Thailand ('Amazing Thailand'), our ads were clichéd and lacked emotional appeal.

There was the shining example of 'God's Own Country'. That gave Amitabh Kant the confidence about what would work, and what would not.

> *The file kept coming back with a query… Finally, based only on the minister's verbal consent, the 'Incredible India' campaign was launched.*

"Kerala was a great learning experience… because of that, I could hit the ground running!"

The first learning was that, to create a great campaign, you need to work with the very best professionals. But how do you do that in a system that is based on the lowest-cost bid?

"I stated on the file that if we select the company with the lowest bid, it will be like

selecting my painting over M F Husain's painting."

Further, he argued, when selecting a creative agency, 80% weightage must be given to 'quality' and only 20% to 'cost'. It was a completely different way of thinking and met with a lot of resistance. The Internal Finance Division was obsessed with the lowest cost. Amitabh stood his ground.

The file went right up to the Finance Minister. Finally, the Incredible India campaign did invite bids based on the QCB model (i.e. Quality-cum-Cost).

As a result, creative powerhouse Ogilvy and Mather (O & M) came on board. The print campaign for 'Incredible India' was conceptualised by creative director V Sunil. Every frame told a story, and these stories went beyond the usual cliché. At the same time, Bharatbala Productions was commissioned to create a soul-stirring 'Incredible India' film.

Headlines such as, 'Not all Indians are polite, hospitable and vegetarian' (the visual depicts a Royal Bengal Tiger!) conveyed the idea of an optimistic and extroverted new India.

However, Union Tourism Minister Jagmohan was sceptical. His view was that, before any advertising was undertaken, we need to work on the infrastructure.

"You tourism people want to take the softer option," said Jagmohan. And, he had a point.

But, you see, it's a classic chicken and egg problem.

"I believe you need to start with marketing… and as people come in… you start improving."[9]

The matter kept going back and forth. It took dogged persuasion to convince Jagmohan of the need to launch a centralised marketing campaign.

After several rounds of interaction, he agreed *ki haan, 'humein karna hai'*. But he never really approved it on file. So it was based only on verbal consent that Amitabh Kant and then Secretary Rati Vinay Jha gave a go-ahead to the 'Incredible India' campaign. A risk —perhaps a big one—but one these officers were willing to take.

A little after the campaign began running, Jagmohan directed that the brand line should be changed to 'The Wonder That Is India' (based on A L Basham's classic work *The Wonder That Was India*). Gently, but firmly, he was apprised that consumer research had found that 'Incredible India' was catchier and more appealing.

Faced with facts, the minister did put aside his personal preference and the creatives remained, as originally conceived. The 'Incredible India' 360-degree campaign began running in mid-2002. The initial outlay was ₹15.7 crores, with a strong focus on the American market.

By the end of 2003, the impact were visible. 'Incredible India' generated a 16% increase in tourist traffic in the first year itself. As the campaign got traction, Jagmohan received many compliments. But he never took any credit for it. In fact, true to his word, the Tourism Minister took up the work of improving infrastructure.

Taking officers from all departments on field visits across the country, he made an action plan for the development of various heritage sites. Jagmohan also converged the functioning of the Ministry of Tourism with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Central Public Works Department (CPWD).[10]

"What he did in 1 year of tourism was more than any minister had done for 30 years!"

During his short tenure (2002–04), destinations like Mahabalipuram, Kumbhalgarh and Haridwar got a complete facelift. Which goes to show that change is possible. And that best results can be achieved when there is a project director to monitor and co-ordinate multiple sarkari agencies. With constant review by the chief secretary of the state.

The world is listening—all ears for the India story

This prevents time and cost overruns. A case in point was the Ajanta–Ellora Conservation which was spearheaded by Ashish Singh, then Managing Director of MTDC. The project was completed with clockwork precision in 2003, with the aid of the Japanese Bank for International Co-operation (JBIC).

So impressed were the Japanese that they sanctioned a Phase 2 at a cost of ₹400 crores.

In May 2004, the Vajpayee government lost the general elections. However, the thrust on tourism continued under the new regime.

At the end of 5 years, the annual outlay for the 'Incredible India' campaign was ₹100 crores. And it was money well spent. In 2002, just 2.4 million foreign tourists visited India. In 2007, that number crossed 5.5 million. What's more, earnings rose from $3 billion (2002) to $11 billion (2007), as upmarket clients began seeing India as a destination of choice.

It is important to understand that 'Incredible India' was more than just advertising! The brand was built by forging personal relationships with tour operators, editors and travel writers, as well as numerous partnerships, promotions, contests and a presence at trade fairs. Supplemented by some smart PR activity.

Because when you cannot out-spend the competition, you must out-think them.

One such opportunity came when Shilpa Shetty was a participant on the popular UK television show *Celebrity Big Brother 5*. One of the housemates, Jade Goody, made disparaging remarks about India, on air. In response, the India Tourism Office, London, released an 'Open Letter to Jade Goody and Friends', inviting them to visit India.

The open letter was published in leading British dailies and became a hot topic of discussion across print, radio, television and online forums.

"We estimate the publicity returns were to the tune of £5 million… what we spent on the ads was just £50,000."

2002–07 also saw a spurt in domestic tourism. Low-cost carriers entered the market, even as new airports came up in Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and Bangalore. As more planes

entered Indian skies, demand for hotel rooms skyrocketed. Leading international chains and local entrepreneurs feverishly expanded their offerings.

In parallel, the Ministry of Tourism launched a 'Bed & Breakfast Scheme' to build a capacity of 10,000 rooms in the NCR region. This was done in October 2006, anticipating a shortage of budget accommodation for visitors during the 2010 Commonwealth Games. The B&B scheme took off in states where local governments played a key role.

In what was an unusually long posting for an IAS officer, Amitabh Kant remained Joint Secretary, Tourism, for 6 years. In this period he dealt with a wide range of stakeholders: the Home Ministry (for visas), state governments (for taxi drivers), customs and immigration, tour operators, ASI officials.

"I realised that everyone—from top to bottom—must be our brand ambassador. Tourism must become a mass movement. It must be everyone's business."

This insight led to the birth of the 'Atithi Devo Bhava' campaign, which consisted of training, roadshows and mass media communication. In the first phase (January–March 2005), over 26,000 stakeholders were trained in 7 cities. An advertisement featuring Aamir Khan reminded people of the ancient Indian belief—'treat a guest like God'.

Just before his tenure ended, Amitabh Kant conceptualised IncredibleIndia@60, a roadshow in the world's financial capital New York, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). India was all over Manhattan—from Wall Street to 5th Avenue—on billboards, lamp posts and buses.

At 40 different venues—train stations, public parks and street corners—artists, craftsmen, folk dancers and chefs from across India wowed New Yorkers.

"Instead of spreading out events, we thought it would be a better idea to do something that creates a big bang."

With that, it was time to move on, once again.

After 2 years in the state cadre, Kant returned to the Centre in 2009, as CEO of the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation (DMICDC). This ambitious project, launched by DIPP (Department of Industrial Planning and Promotion), envisaged setting up a dedicated freight corridor—i.e. a container train between Delhi and Mumbai.[11]

It takes up to 14 days for goods from North India to reach the ports on the western coast. The freight corridor would reduce this to 14 hours. While the execution of the corridor was with the Indian Railways, it was still DIPP's baby. And so, Amitabh Kant was deputed as the first CEO of DMICDC.

"No proper urbanisation has taken place in India since the British period. This was a huge opportunity to create new cities, and do it the right way!"

The intention was to take land and do very planned, very scientific development. The idea was to create 24 industrial regions from scratch, along the 1,483-km railway track.

A hugely ambitious project. So, the project was broken down into 'doable components'. In the first phase, 7 areas were identified for development: Dholera in Gujarat, Shendra-Bidkin in Maharashtra (near Aurangabad), Vikram Udyogpuri (near Ujjain in MP) and Greater Noida. The other sites are located in Haryana and Rajasthan.

The initial corpus for the project was barely ₹10 crores. And the plan was to get everything done by the private sector. But why would they invest in building trunk infrastructure like drainage, sewage and roads? These are not revenue-generating activities but 'core areas' which only the government will fund.

It took 65 rounds of meetings to secure ₹18,500 crores from the Finance Ministry, to kick-start the project. While the government held a 49% stake in DMICDC, the rest was in the hands of IL & FS and IDFC. These companies had plans to bid for downstream projects such as power, water and transport. Which created a massive conflict of interest.

"We did equity restructuring… bringing in the Japan International Bank for

International Co-operation as a stakeholder. Along with HUDCO, IIFCL and LIC."

The challenge with developing new industrial and urban settlements is that, when the government builds roads and water connections, land values shoot up. But this upside is captured by the politicians and builders. What if, instead, that benefit came back to the city? To create that paradigm, an SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle) was conceived.

> *Cities are made over 30–40 years. But how you plan them… how you lay the foundation, is very critical.*

The SPVs are between the Centre and state government entities. Under this model, the state is responsible for making land available. The Centre will then release funds matching the land's worth, for its development. Once developed, land is allotted to investors. The money thus raised is used to develop the next parcel of land. Thus creating a virtuous cycle.

However, it has been a very slow process. The idea of DMIC was first mooted in 2007, a CEO appointed in 2009. But Cabinet approval came only in 2011. So, what is one to do?

2 options: feel helpless and frustrated, or find something constructive to do.

"I used this time to study the process of urbanisation, and best practices across the world."

A hundred years ago, when America urbanised land, gas and water were cheaply available. So, they had the luxury of creating sprawling cities. Today, these are scarce commodities. Hence, today's cities must be compact, they must recycle water and waste. And instead of cars, they must plan for walking, cycling and public transport.

Amitabh Kant was clear about one thing: we cannot work in a sarkari fashion. Thus, the master plan was created by some of the finest project management experts in the world. A majority of whom are from Asia. From Singapore, the art of water management. From China, the science of master planning. And 'smart city' concepts from Korea and Japan.

The 7 cities were to be spread over 2,396 sq km, with Dholera being larger than Singapore.

By the year 2040, the investment in the DMICDC project would be over $100 billion, making it the world's 'largest infrastructure project'. An extremely complex one, which had never been attempted before… Naturally, it came with a unique set of challenges.

In an interview with the *Economic Times* (in July 2011), Amitabh Kant stated, "States must move faster!"

Almost 8 years later, states are still struggling to acquire the promised land. In Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, affected farmers have moved the High Court. Although ₹15,000 crores has been released by the Centre to states for development work, getting approvals and clearances from multiple government agencies and ministries means more delay.

The $4.5 billion committed by Japan to the project is yet to be utilised. Yet experts say that, by Indian standards, DMIC is a hare, not a tortoise. The first phase of the project, i.e. 40–50 sq. km in each of the 7 cities, was expected to be ready by 2019. It may well take longer… But in the near future, there will be a huge impact.[12]

While the gestation period of such projects is long, the tenure of the CEO does not match it. In March 2014, Amitabh Kant was appointed as Secretary, DIPP. Just 2 years short of retirement, there isn't much left to prove to anyone. But maintaining the status quo is not this officer's style!

So, what can you achieve in 2 years? A lot, if you are crystal clear about it. Early in his career, Amitabh Kant realised that an average IAS posting was very short. So for every new

job, he started the practice of drawing up a vision, of ‘what I want to achieve’ in 2 years’ time.

Then, each day, he would list down, ‘what I need to do, to achieve this’.

Yes, the routine work and clearing of files must also happen.

“For me, files are not an end; I clear all my files every night; but day time is for pursuing my vision…”

And any such vision requires the alignment of political will.

Shortly after Amitabh Kant became Secretary, DIPP, the BJP government came into power, and with it, a new energy and vibrancy. In his inaugural address from the ramparts of the Red Fort, the Prime Minister announced the ‘Make in India’ initiative, which aimed to attract investment and make the country a global manufacturing hub.

DIPP was given the task of ‘making it happen’.

The ‘Make in India’ program was officially launched on 25 September 2014, with a logo featuring the silhouette of a lion on the prowl. This speed of execution was possible because Amitabh Kant had been there, ‘done that’ before. He quickly called in V Sunil, the creative genius behind the ‘Incredible India’ campaign.

“The original design we presented to the PM featured an elephant. It was he who suggested we use a lion instead, which is part of the Ashok Chakra…”

But the public face of ‘Make in India’ was just one small element. Most of the work—the difficult work—was behind the scenes.

Before liberalisation, the Indian economy was a stodgy Ambassador car which simply could not compete on the investment circuit. Then, the economy opened up and said, ‘I am a Ferrari’. But the engines would still not rev up. So, the ‘mechanics’ at DIPP had to open it up, identify the problems and start fixing them.

The first major problem tackled was the FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) regime, which had become very complex. It took 22 ‘Cabinet notes’ and dozens of inter-ministerial consultations but, finally, sector after sector got opened up. E-commerce, defence manufacturing, insurance, pension funds…

However, one of the big complaints from investors (and local businessmen) was that India is very complex, very difficult to work in. This was reflected in the annual ‘ease of doing business’ ranking released by the World Bank. In 2014, India was ranked a dismal 142 out of 189 countries.

> *One of the things I always do—whatever job I am in—is to first draw up my vision. Of what I want to achieve in 2 years’ time.*

So, this became the second focus area. But how does one do away with rules, regulations, procedures and paperwork? By applying common sense and implementing technology, where possible. Also, working closely with many different ministries, and going through Parliament, where necessary.

“It takes time but you have to keep pushing at it, otherwise it will not happen…”

For example, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has automated 26 rules and clubbed 5 procedures for starting a business into 1. Thus reducing the time taken to incorporate a company from 15 working days to 0.6 working days. On the legislative side, Parliament passed the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act (2016).

Also, a National Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) policy was approved by the Cabinet, reducing the time taken to grant patents and trademarks.

In a large country like India, a lot depends on what the state governments do. Therefore, in 2015, DIPP created a framework to assess and rank states on ‘ease of doing business’.

In the very first year, Gujarat ranked number 1, but in the second year, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh beat Gujarat. While states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand edged out industrially advanced Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. And, there is a tangible benefit: higher the ranking, higher the chances of attracting investment.

> *We have done away with 1,300 laws, making it a bit easier for people to do business in India.*

“My belief is that competition, putting states to name and shame, putting it in the public domain, leads to good governance.”

Another high-profile DIPP initiative was ‘Start up India’, launched by PM Modi on 16 January 2016, in the presence of hundreds of young entrepreneurs. The event included a Q & A session titled ‘Face-to-face with policy-makers’, wherein secretaries of various government ministries had to share what *they* were doing to enable the start-up ecosystem.

Shortly after this, the ‘Make in India’ week was held in Mumbai. An event overseen by Amitabh Kant, to the last detail. Attended by 4 heads of state, 25 ministers of trade and business delegations from 65 countries. The idea was to attract manufacturing in 10 key sectors, from defence and automobiles to food processing and infrastructure.

₹100 crores was the marketing budget for this event, which raised investment pledges of over $222 crores. It was to be the swansong of Amitabh Kant’s career.

Just 2 months short of retirement, he was hoping to join the Competition Commission of India. Where there wouldn’t be much work, and lots of time for golf…

That’s when there was a summons from the Prime Minister’s Office. To take charge as the CEO of NITI Aayog.

Formerly known as the Planning Commission, NITI Aayog came into being in 2015. Where NITI stands for National Institution for Transforming India. Gone is the socialist era of making ‘5-year plans’. Instead, NITI Aayog operates like a think tank which guides government policy and strategy. Monitors and evaluates development, in all sectors.

The last 2 years have, in fact, been the most satisfying for Amitabh Kant.

In May 2016, NITI Aayog launched the ‘Atal Innovation Mission’, which supports ‘tinkering labs’ at schools. What is interesting is that schools compete for the grant money.

“One of the key changes is that, for everything we do, we use the ‘challenge method’.”

Each school must provide a 1,500 sq ft space, allot teachers to oversee the lab and show a strong sense of commitment. Out of thousands who apply, only the best are selected.

So far, 3,000 tinkering labs have been set up across the country. The labs have a range of electronic, robotic and IOT equipment, with an emphasis on do-it-yourself kits. The aim is to develop a love for science and technology in children, from an early age. The scattering of seeds, which will germinate and grow… and reap a rich harvest, in times to come.

NITI Aayog also supports 25 incubation centres and conducts ‘grand innovation challenges’, inviting solutions in areas like smart agriculture, waste management and many other areas.

However, the single-most important function of NITI Aayog is monitoring. There has been a shift from physical and financial monitoring, to outcome-based monitoring. Which has been instituted across all sectors. The CEO, NITI Aayog, presents the progress made in implementing various flagship schemes, on a monthly basis.

“I have had the pleasure of working with the Prime Minister very closely.”

While change is happening, it often feels too slow, too invisible. There seem to be ‘2 Indias’, living in 2 parallel universes.

Acknowledging this, in January 2018, NITI Aayog launched the ‘Transformation of Aspirational Districts’ program. The idea is to monitor the most backward districts of India across 49 indicators, including health, education, nutrition and financial inclusion. 115 such districts have been identified from among 712 districts across India.

But the data for these indicators was extremely outdated as well as inaccurate. The solution was to capture data from the field through third parties, on a real-time basis. Knowledge partners include Tata Trust, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Piramal Foundation. All of whom are working for the government, free of cost.

“We have got a vast number of NGOs involved because I feel that the challenges are just too many for just a District Collector to solve.”

When the very first aspirational districts ranking was released in April 2018, some startling facts came to light. The worst performing district in India was Mewat in Haryana, which is barely 50 km from Gurgaon. The district ranks very low on all aspects of health and education due to the poor status of women and the influence of khap panchayats.

But what happened next is more interesting. The Haryana government woke up and put pressure on the local district administration to pull up its socks. Because data is collected real-time, change is captured as it happens. So even a poorly performing district has a chance to move up in the Delta Ranking (which tracks incremental progress).

“If immunisation is not being done in a particular district, it’s not a question of money, it’s a question of governance…”

And ‘naming and shaming’ is working. There is an urgency among District Collectors, which is infecting local administrations, to simply do their jobs. Moreover, when the PM travels, he makes it a point to meet these young officers and spend hours with them. And there’s nothing more motivating than a pat on the back from the top management.

> *People who want to meet me, I try and meet them because I don’t want anybody to say government officials are not accessible… and I learn a lot from them.*

There is so much to do, and so little time. Amitabh Kant is working around the clock, on all Saturdays, and sometimes even Sunday. So, what happens when his term ends?

The important thing in government is to build systems and institutionalise what you are doing. So nothing is dependent on a single individual. You get the right people, create a structure and a system of monitoring. A building with a strong foundation can withstand even an earthquake… the same principle applies to institutions.

As in corporate life, a leader within the government must have a vision, get the team to buy into it and keep them motivated. What is also important is to build a mass momentum around what you are doing. For this, a public servant must co-opt civil society, NGOs and the media.

“Because you will face a lot of opposition… you must be able to build counter-pressure in favour of change. That is the only way you can succeed.”

There has also been a radical change in the HR policy within the government. Young professionals under 35 have joined NITI Aayog on a contract basis. They bring a tremendous amount of energy and freshness into the organisation. Transforming the way it works.

The impact of uplifting aspirational districts, or of the Atal Innovation Mission, will only be felt in the longer run. Because social change is a slow phenomenon.

On the economic front, various efforts are bearing fruit. In the last 4 years, India has moved up significantly in 'ease of doing business' rankings.[13] FDI inflows have increased to $62 billion annually, surpassing China. Today, 28 telecom companies are manufacturing in India and exporting worldwide.

However, Amitabh Kant is quick to concede that 'Make in India' is still a work in progress.

"A lot more work needs to be done… but I am an eternal optimist, it will happen."

Four decades of government service make many an officer cynical, or even bitter. Amitabh Kant is not one of them. Although, he's had his share of run-ins with politicians. On one occasion he was actually sacked as MD of a state-owned corporation (for not listening to a minister's illegal instructions).

"I felt extremely demoralised and asked for a transfer to another department."

The transfer was denied. He was told, "We can't let you go... the work you are doing is excellent!"

Soon after, there was a Cabinet reshuffle. And it was the minister who was reassigned.

"What I've learnt is that you have to take these problems in your stride…"

An officer with high integrity who has taken the right action may face setbacks, but there will also be people within the system who support you.

What you need is mental toughness, and tremendous positive energy. Which is why Amitabh Kant takes out 2 hours every morning, to recharge his batteries. From 6–8 am, he works out at home or at the Amatra gym, Hotel Ashok. Also a bit of yoga, and when possible, a game of golf. If, perchance, he skips this routine, the day doesn't go well.

"I feel exhausted… so now it has become part of my system. To keep this time for myself."

Some days, he will rise at 4 am, and do some writing. This could be newspaper columns or jottings in a diary (they come in handy when writing speeches). In this pursuit, he is perhaps inspired by his mother, Dr Sita Srivastava, who spent 18 years as Principal of Maitreyi College and went on to write 22 books in Hindi.

Elder daughter Vedica is following in these footsteps—she's published a book on the First World War (*If I Die Here, Who Will Remember Me?*). And is now completing her MBA at Wharton. Vanshica—the younger one—recently finished her studies at Oxford. The girls do complain that their dad doesn't spend enough time at home. But not for want of trying…

As for his wife—Ranjeeta is an artist. So, she is 'busy painting' while he is working. And the arrangement works!

Amitabh Kant received an extension as CEO of NITI Aayog, till 30 June 2019. It may well be the last official posting in a long and impactful career.

Shakespeare once said that all the world's a stage, and we are all but players. And the credo of an IAS officer might well be summed up as 'make systemic changes'. So when you are gone, your work will live on.

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[1] Ayesha Manzil is now a high-end boutique hotel.

[2] 30% was the subsidy, 70% was loan to the fishermen's group.

[3] Today there are over 700,000 women SHGs across India which play a significant role in the social advancement of the poor, particularly women.

[4] The District Collector of Calicut is the CEO of the Malabar Airport Development Society.

[5] The first bridge was built in 1940 by Sir Robert Bristow and now carries only 2- and 3-wheelers.
[6] The CGH Earth Group now operates 15 eco-tourism resorts.
[7] As per Ayurveda sutras, varsha ritu (monsoon) is the ideal time for rejuvenation.
[8] This bungalow is mentioned in the novel *The God of Small Things* as 'History House'.
[9] When Kerala ran its first print campaign in the late 1980s, everyone mocked them saying, "What do you have other than an ITDC hotel in Kovalam?"
[10] As Governor J & K, Jagmohan was instrumental in upgrading the Vaishno Devi shrine.
[11] A second freight corridor is envisaged between Amritsar and Kolkata.
[12] The master plan is to build 24 cities from scratch along the 1,483-km railway track, by 2040.
[13] In 2018, India was ranked 77 in World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business' rankings.

Naam gum jayega, chehra yeh badal jayega
Mera kaam hi pehchaan hai, bas yaad rahe

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

I think the first thing is—strive for excellence in whatever you do.

Second, never be a status-quoist. Always try and disrupt the system. Do something innovative.

Whichever job you want to do, always look at the difference you are going to make… at the end of your tenure, people should be able to *feel* that difference.

And fourth is, you can't do this without creating a great team. So you have to motivate and inspire your team.

As regards the public sector, the opportunity which the government gives you, no private sector job can give you. The scale and size of what you are doing—the opportunity—is just enormous.

You have to hit the ground running. Wherever you go, you need to have your plan of action and crack it.

Again, it's very important to understand that you cannot do it yourself, you need to build teams. Secondly, always keep the people above fully informed, make them a part of your mission.

Let your dream become their dream, and if they become a part of that dream, then everything will fall into place.

CHITRA GUPTA

Zeenat Mahal Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2

As a teacher, Chitra Gupta strived for excellence and experimented with unorthodox ideas in her classroom. After 2-and-a-half decades, when she became a Principal, Chitra implemented a bold new vision. Transforming a low-performing government school for girls into an institution of excellence.

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

If you're lucky, you've had a teacher like this in your life.

Dressed in a crisp cotton sari, always on time for her class. A teacher who really cared about her students but who could also instil fear in your heart. In a good way.

One raised eyebrow is all she needed to convey, '*Tum se yeh ummeed nahin thi* (You could've done better).'

Ah, how you slogged for the next 6 months, hoping to live up to her high standards.…

And how you glowed when she patted you on the back and said, "*Shabaash, mere bachhe!*"

For hundreds of girls in Delhi's Zeenat Mahal Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2, Chitra Gupta was that mentor and change-maker.

Tough as nails on the outside, but with a heart of pure gold.

Chitra Gupta could have behaved like a typical government teacher: Sign the register, complete the syllabus and rush home. But, right from the start, she chose to do more.

First as a teacher, then as a Principal, she put the welfare of her students above everything. She used every trick in the book—from authority to affection, *jazbaat* to *jugaad*—to bring about never-before-seen change in a hitherto neglected school. Where the 10th and 12th class pass percentage hovered around 50%. In 2010, Zeenat Mahal Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2 surprised everyone with 100% results.

But Principal Chitra Gupta's mission did not end here.

She persuaded, motivated and facilitated her girls to join some of the best colleges in Delhi University. To aspire for a better and brighter future than their parents.

As 'CEO' of the school, Chitra Gupta was able to create a sense of vision and mission, and back those up with necessary action. The 'Zeenat Mahal model of school management' is now included in the syllabus used to train principals in Delhi government schools and elsewhere.

Over the last 3 years, there have been substantial systemic changes in the Delhi government school system. Which is a rare and beautiful thing.

But remember, you are the system. So fight the good fight, do what feels right.

Koi aur kare, ya na kare. Badte chalein, ladte chalein.

Chitra Gupta was born in Delhi but grew up in Cuttack in Orissa, where her father had established a small business.

"I was a good student but not very ambitious. *Mera koi vishesh aim nahin tha.*"

In Class 10, Chitra received a scholarship after topping the state board in Hindi. Which continued until she completed her BA (History), ranking fifth in the university.

"I wanted to go to Bhubaneshwar to do MA (History). *But papa ne shehar se baahar padhne ki ijaazat nahin di.*"

In fact, all the elders felt it was better to do a B.Ed and take up a teaching job. But Chitra put her foot down. She wanted to do an MA—even if it meant changing her subject to Home Science.

"I felt, my future with B.Ed is weak… I will never be more than a school teacher."

Chitra won the Utkal University gold medal in her MA. And then joined City Women's College, Cuttack, as an ad hoc lecturer. She then appeared for the Orissa Public Service Commission exams and was appointed as a permanent lecturer.

"I was posted in a government college, but it was very far, close to Andhra Pradesh. There was no toilet in the college! *Kuch jama nahin.*"

By this time, Chitra was 23, and her parents were concerned about her marriage prospects. Everyone felt it was best that she shift to Delhi and look for a job. As well as a groom.

"I stayed with my nanaji in East of Kailash. I appeared for the interview and got selected by the Directorate of Education as a PGT (post-graduate teacher)."

In 1981, Chitra joined Swami Dayanand Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, in Old Rajinder Nagar, teaching Home Science to classes 11 and 12. It was a bit ironic.

People remarked, "*Jo teachership tum nahi chahti thi wahi ab karni hai* (The teaching job you never wanted is now your career)."

But Chitra quickly adjusted to the situation. One thing she understood early was the difference between knowing a subject and teaching it.

"I enjoyed taking classes and always had 100% result—right from day 1."

2 years into her job, Chitra got married. But the marriage didn't last. When she separated after just 3 months, Chitra was pregnant. This was a tough period, as a single, working mom.

The divorce came after 5 years. And then, Dr Rajendra Gupta (Rajan) entered her life, like a ray of sunshine.

> Bachhon ko laga ki bhai thoda sa hum kuch bolenge to yeh madam sun lengi *(Kids opened up because they felt I would listen).*

"Rajan's sister was a teacher in my school… she brought us together. He cared for me, respected me and accepted my 5-year-old daughter as his own."

Since her *sasural* was in Ghaziabad, Chitra applied for a transfer. The school allotted was near the Delhi–UP border, and it was in a slum area. Very different from the one in Old Rajinder Nagar.

“I didn’t have any problem. Because I knew: I have to work, whichever school I get, I will work.”

In her previous school, Chitra had students from business families. The girls were not serious about studies, because *aagey shaadi hi to karni hai*. But they came dressed presentably and got good marks.

The situation in the *jhuggi-jhopri* colony school in Nanad Nagari was completely different. The children lived in cramped little *kholis*. The parents were illiterate, and in addition to school, the kids had to do all kinds of work to supplement the family income.

Walking through the mohalla to catch the bus home, Chitra noticed girls in school uniform making bindis. Others were peeling green chanas.

“The children told me, we can’t study once we go home. *Hamare paas padhai ke liye time nahin hai.*”

Chitra made it a point to talk to the children, understand their problems. Slowly, she won their trust.

One day, a girl came up to her and said, “Madam, can I come to the lab on the last working day and ask you something?”

“*Abhi main khali hoon, abhi bata de* (You can ask me right now—I am free),” replied Chitra.

The girl said, “*Madam, mere ghar me padhne ki jagah nahi hai, aur main padhna chahti hoon* (There is no place to study in my house, and I want to study).”

Chitra readily agreed. This simple request opened her eyes to the difficulties her students were facing. She gave an open invitation to her class: whenever you have a free period, come to the lab and study.

In fact, Chitra began the practice of staying back for an hour, each day, after school. While she completed her admin work, students could read, write and study.

“*Poora school mere control mein nahin tha*, but with my own classes, I tried to improve those children.”

Because the point of making a difference is to start—wherever you are.

2 years later, she shifted to the Delhi University campus, where her lecturer-husband had been allotted staff quarters. Chitra requested a transfer. She was posted to a school in Adarsh Nagar, where she worked for the next 7 years.

This school had a mix of students: some from well-to-do families and some from low-income families. But the two camps did not mix with each other. Even in class, they sat separately.

The job of a teacher does not end with the classroom

"*Maine yeh dekha aur socha—yeh nahin chalega* (I observed this and thought, this won't do)."

First of all, Chitra mixed up the seating arrangement. *Ek idhar, ek udhar, ek idhar, ek udhar*. She formed sub-groups of four students each for project work and lab work. Each group had two rich kids and two low-income kids.

Chitra also developed a system in which one class every week was reserved for a 'mock test'. Students spent half the time writing answers and the other half checking each other's answer sheets.

"*Doosre ki mistake nikalne ka matlab wo khud wo wali mistake kabhi nahi karega* (Finding mistakes in someone else's work ensures you never make the mistake yourself)," was her philosophy.

In the Home Science lab, Chitra put emphasis on teaching healthy cooking that used everyday ingredients. Things that all her students could afford.

"Using cheese and badaam is easy. *Lekin kam paise mein aap kaise diet plan karte ho, wo important hai* (How to plan a diet with less money is important)."

For 'Home Science' is not a fancy cooking class, it is about health and nutrition.

With all these efforts, Chitra became a well-loved figure in her school. After serving for 7 years, in 2005, she was promoted to Vice Principal. And shifted to the Government Girl's Secondary School at Nicholson Road, near Kashmere Gate.

"I got a real shock when I joined the school. There was no Principal, no clerical staff. More than half the teaching posts were vacant!"

All her life, Chitra had excelled as a Home Science teacher. Now, she was expected to look into *everything*. Finance was not her cup of tea, but there was no choice. She would have to learn it!

What is a cash book, what is a log book. How to disburse salaries, how to calculate arrears, how to maintain stock registers, so on and so forth.

"*Kuch nahi pata tha. Wo kisi ko bula ke seekha. Kahin jaake seekha* (I knew nothing so I took all the help I could get—and I learnt it)."

For a leader cannot know it all. And must have the humility to accept it.

The school was in a sorry state with a Class 10 CBSE result of 6%! Chitra saw it as a challenge.

"As a teacher, I used to have many ideas—I will do this, I will do that!"

This was her chance—to put those ideas into practice. Chitra worked with the teachers to improve both discipline and academics. That same year, Class 10 results shot up to 48%.

In 2007, Chitra was interviewed by UPSC and selected for the cadre of Principal. She was to take charge of Zeenat Mahal Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2, Lal Kuan. In the old, walled city of Delhi.

Of the 719 schools run by the Delhi government, this one was what teachers call a 'punishment posting'. The job had been offered to two other candidates. And both had refused to join.

"*Ek ne kaha, meri gaadi waha nahi jaati, main nahi jaungi. Dusri ne kaha, nahi main in logon ke beech kaam nahin kar sakti* (One had said, the road is too narrow for my car. The second said, I cannot work in this area, with these people)."

For 100% of the 1,246 girls enrolled in Zeenat Mahal school were Muslims.

But when Chitra Gupta got her orders, there were no second thoughts. *Join to karna hi hai*. She googled for the school's address and took the metro to Chaavari Bazaar. *Wahan se*, she hailed a cycle rickshaw to Lal Kuan.

"*Aagey paidal se*," said the rickshaw driver, stopping in front of a narrow lane. But despite walking *seedha*, then *tedha*, then *saamne*, Chitra could not see any school.

"*Madam wahin to hai, wo neela darwaza* (It's right there, behind the blue door)," they insisted.

Chitra walked back, and this time, she noticed the door—it was just 2-and-a-half-feet wide. Sandwiched between a kite shop, a masala-grinding unit and a gol-gappewala. There was no signboard.

"*Jab jhaanka maine, to mujhe ladkiya najar aayi, school uniform mein. Pata chala ye to waakai school hai* (When I peeped in, I saw girls in uniform and realised this really is a school)."

Zeenat Mahal was once the residence of the youngest begum of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. A school was started in the erstwhile royal haveli in 1901.

As it stands today, the school is housed in a 4-storey building, inside the ruins of the haveli of Begum Zeenat Mahal. (The school had to be run in 2 shifts to accommodate the 1,200 + students). The Class 10 result was just 50% and Class 12 result, 60%.

That first day, when Chitra Gupta walked into Zeeenat Mahal, she had no 'master plan'.

"*Main dekhti gayi, jo jo problems mere saamne aati gayi, main usko hatati gayi* (I saw the situation, as problems came up in front of me, I kept solving them)."

> Bahut si cheez hum sochte rehte hain as a teacher lekin implement karne ka mauka mila when I became Principal *(As a teacher, I wanted many changes; when I became Principal, I*

made those changes).

The very first problem Chitra noticed was with the morning assembly. The Directorate of Education had provided a CD with a weekly schedule of activities, songs and prayers. "The CD was playing, but the girls were standing stiff and silent. *Zombie ki tarah.*"

She summoned the physical education and yoga teachers.

"There were no exercises. No yoga. No newspaper reading. *Chakkar kya hai* (What is going on)?"

The Physical Education teacher, a Hindu, replied, "Madam they won't sing *Vande Mataram* or *Jana Gana Mana*. It is against their religion."

The yoga teacher was a Muslim. She said, "Parents have told them yoga is Hindu—*wo nahi karenge.…*" (The yoga teacher's father had 'allowed' her only because she was getting a government job.)

Kuch to karna padega! The next day, during assembly, Chitra took the microphone herself.

"*Bachhon, assembly ke liye taiyyar ho* (Children, are you ready for the assembly)?"

There was no response. Chitra continued…

"*Shuru karte hai. Aaj hum sirf ek cheez karenge. Vande Mataram* (Let us start. We will do just one thing today. We will sing *Vande Mataram*)."

Chitra motioned for the CD to be played.

"*Mere peeche peeche bolna* (Repeat after me)." Pin-drop silence.

"You girls don't wish to sing *Vande Mataram*? That's okay. But can you share the reason with me?"

Koi jawaab nahin. It was time to take the bull by the horns.

"*Aap logon ko mana kiya gaya hai. Ab main batati hoon isko kyo gaana chahiye* (You have been told not to sing. Now I will tell you why you should sing)."

Jo mere conscience ne kaha, woh main karti chali *(I have always followed my conscience).*

Patiently, line by line, Chitra Gupta explained the meaning of *Vande Mataram*.

"*Vande ka matlab aadaab. Mataram ka matlab Ammi. Ammi ko aadab kitne bachhe karte hai* (Vande means salute and Mataram means mother. How many of you salute your mothers)?"

All the girls raised their hands.

"Sujalam means *accha paani* (good water). Suphalam means *achchi hawa* (good air). Ammi gives you all these things, so we salute her. This earth is like our mother, we salute her."

It took her 20 minutes to explain the entire song. And then, Chitra gave them a challenge.

"Now go home and discuss. *Hamari madam aise bol rahi hain, aap aise bol rahe ho, isme sahi kaunsa hai* (Madam says this, you say that, which is correct)? We will meet tomorrow."

The next day, when the CD was played, more than half the children sang along.

To the other half, Chitra remarked, "Perhaps you forgot to discuss… go home and do it today!"

And again, she explained the meaning of the song, line by line. This time, in 10

minutes.

By day 3, all 1,200 girls were singing *Vande Mataram*. Of their own free will.

In a similar fashion, Chitra got the girls to participate in the daily non-denominational prayer, *Hum ko Mann ki Shakti Dena* (God, give us strength of mind).

"*Hum haath jod ke maangte hai, aap haath khol ke maangte ho. Maangte to uparwaale se hi hain* (We join hands in prayer, you open hands in prayer, both ask from the Almighty above)."

She allowed the girls to say the prayer with open palms, as if offering namaaz. Another hurdle crossed.

Then came the question of yoga. Chitra instructed the teacher to go asana by asana, explaining the health benefits of each yoga posture.

The teacher started with pranayam. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

"*Kisko nahin chahiye achchi wali saans, phule huye fefde, zyada oxygen* (Who doesn't want healthy lungs and more oxygen in the body)? I will exempt those girls from yoga."

Nobody took exemption. Thus, with firmness, with logic and a lot of love, Chitra Gupta connected with her students. *Zeenat Mahal ki hawa badalne lagi*. New ideas, new energy, new purpose.

The girls lived in a cloistered atmosphere. Rarely stepping out of the mohalla. They had never been for inter-school competitions. The new Principal decided to change that.

The school put together a yoga team. But on the day of the competition, 4 of the students did not turn up. Chitra Gupta called their parents personally and requested them to meet her.

"I will take just 5 minutes of your time. Please come—it is important!"

When the parents came, the Principal asked 2 students to give a demonstration.

"*Aap dekho aur batao—isme Hindupan kya hai? Yeh sirf haath-pair ko lachila aur tandurust banata hai* (What is Hindu about yoga? It keeps the body flexible and fit)."

The parents said, "All right, but we don't want to send our girls outside. It is not safe."

Chitra assured them that 1 teacher would be sent to chaperone every 5 students. And also drop the girls at their doorstep. Ultimately, parents *maan gaye*.

It was the school's good luck that the team won a prize in its very first outing. The next morning parents came to the Principal's office, beaming with pride.

"*Madam ji, yeh to bahut achcha kiya aapne. Mohalle mein hamari naak oonchi ho gayi* (Madam, you did a wonderful thing. We have earned so much respect in the neighbourhood)."

"This is just the beginning… have faith in me and co-operate with me. *Main kabhi bhi bachho ko haani nahi hone doongi* (I will never let anything bad happen to your children)."

A flower blooms when there is water and sunlight. A child blooms when there is encouragement. And that's what Chitra did with her girls.

When a pamphlet arrived from the Delhi State Department of Environment for a poster competition, she summoned the drawing teacher.

"*Madam, prize-wize sab pehle se fix hota hai* (These contests are rigged)," protested the teacher.

"My girls will participate," said the Principal. "Whether they win or not doesn't matter."

Chitra knew that Zeenat students were artistic. And sure enough, they produced more than 20 entries. The Principal then formed a team of teachers to choose the top 10. Then the top 5.

After much deliberation, they shortlisted 3 paintings. Which were entered for the contest.

When the result was declared, Chitra was in shock. A student of Zeenat Mahal school

had won the first prize—and a cash award of ₹25,000!

"*Main seedha class mein gayi, aur us bachhi ko gale lagaya* (I went straight to her class and hugged the girl)."

> Bachha ek kori slate hai, usme jaise likh do wo waisa ho jaata hai *(A child is like a blank slate, we have to be careful what we write on it).*

The girl was in the middle of taking an exam. She began shaking, and crying. Chitra gave her a glass of water and calmed her down.

"*Maine kaha isko 10 minute aur dena exam ke liye* (I said give her 10 more minutes for the exam)."

A box of sweets was ordered. All 22 girls who had entered their paintings in the competition were felicitated. It was a big morale-booster for the entire school.

The next year there were so many entries that it became difficult to choose! And once again, a Zeenat Mahal student placed second and won a cash prize of ₹20,000. These paintings were later published in the annual calendar brought out by the Department of Environment.

"*Bachhiyon mein ek confidence jaaga* (The girls became more confident)."

Bankers make money, teachers change lives

Thus, slowly but surely, Chitra won over both students and parents. Not just with what she said and what she did. But with the purity in her heart.

"*Mere dimaag mein kabhi nahi aaya ki ye Muslim hai, main Hindu. Mujhe to saare bachhe ek jaise hi lagte hai* (I never thought they are Muslim, I am Hindu. All children are equally dear to me)."

For these children, Chitra was willing to fight every battle. Early on, she noticed that the school had 2 gates. And people strolled across the courtyard as if it was a thoroughfare.

"*Maine agle din se peechhe ka gate band karwa diya* (I shut the back gate)."

The next morning, a group of 30-35 locals barged into Chitra's office. They were used to taking the shortcut. And considered it their right to do so.

"*Aap Hindu ho—is liye aisa kiya* (You are a Hindu, that's why you did this)," they fumed.

Chitra calmly replied, "My concern is the safety of my girls. *Koi chalta hua ladkiyo ko chhed gaya toh kaun jimmedar hoga* (If a passerby teases a girl, who will be responsible)?"

"*Hum jimmedar hain, hum is ilaake mein rehte hai* (We are from this area, we take responsibility)," came the reply.

Chitra offered a pen and paper and asked each one to write their name, address and phone number. Then sign against a sentence which said: *Hum ye rasta khula chahte hai, ladkiyo ke upar koi aanch aati hai, toh uske jimmedar hum honge* (We want this gate to stay open, we are responsible if there is any untoward incident).

Quietly, the crowd dispersed. Not a single man put down his signature. And the gate remained shut.

"*Bas thodi boldness chahiye. Bachhon ke benefit ke liye hai, toh usme ghabrane ki koi baat nahi hai* (One has to be bold. When I am working for the benefit of the children, why be afraid)."

Boldness not just with outsiders, but in dealing with one's own. Chitra confronted the prejudices of her teachers. 60% of them were Muslim ladies and 40% were Hindus.

Hindu teachers posted to the school generally used to eke out their 2 years in Zeenat Mahal before requesting a transfer. They never felt 'at home' during their tenure. Chitra Gupta decided this had to change.

"*Sabhi teachers ke mann mein bachhon ke liye wahi pyar utpann ho… Staff mein bifurcation na ho* (I wanted all teachers to bond with the students equally, there should be no divide). I reconstituted all the committees in the school to ensure there was representation of both Hindu and Muslim teachers."

The children who attend Zeenat Mahal school come from low-income families. Daughters of candle-makers and embroidery workers. Many assist their parents after school hours.

To love them, you must understand where they come from. Life is not easy for these girls. Large families living in tiny, windowless rooms. With no sunlight or fresh air.

"*Dheere dheere mere ko bachhon se pata chala… Jagah ki kami ki wajah se, wo baari baari mein sote hain* (The kids told me that, due to lack of space, they take turns to sleep at night)!"

Children were often late to school. Many were simply absent, without explanation.

One day, while inspecting the attendance registers, Chitra noticed a peculiar trend. A certain child would be absent every Monday. Another was absent every Tuesday.

When she asked the teachers, they could not explain it. So Chitra called a student to her office. And gently probed.

"*Beta aap itni chutti kyo karte ho. Tabiyat thik nahi rehti hai? Bukhaar aata hai aapko* (Child, why are you absent so often? Do you have an illness? Do you get fever)?"

The girl shyly nodded 'yes'. But how could a fever strike, without fail, every Monday?

By and by, Chitra understood that the child was suffering from tuberculosis (TB). Every Monday, she went to get her DOTS pill (which is administered only at government health centres).

It was the same story with dozens of Zeenat Mahal girls. Treatment of TB was important, but so was attending school. *Problem kaise solve kiya jaiye?*

Using her common sense approach, Chitra Gupta went to the government dispensary in the lane next to the school. She asked the doctor, "Can I send my girls to get the DOTS dose here?"

"Yes," replied the doctor. "But you must transfer their cards to this centre." He also agreed to extend the clinic timings till 1.30 pm so that the girls could get the treatment after school.

Chitra called the parents of the girls with TB and counselled them. It took 2-3 meetings, but finally, the cards were transferred. Within a month, absenteeism fell drastically.

"*Health ke saath saath unki padhaai bhi acchhi ho gayi* (Both health and studies improved)."

You cannot solve a problem until you know its root cause.

And you cannot know the cause if you sit inside your office.

The new Principal went to the classrooms, and mostly, she listened. Whenever a teacher was on leave, Chitra would use the free period to hold an open house.

"*Bachhon se khub aaram se baat karti thi. Ki kaise padhai ho rahi hai. Kya samajh mein aaya. Achcha kitaabein dikhao… copy dikhao* (I used to talk to the girls informally. What are you studying, what have you understood, show me your notebooks)."

In this manner, the Principal also got honest feedback about the teachers. But it was not all about studies and syllabus.

"*Thoda hansi-majak aur ek kahani zaroor sunati thi* (I told them some jokes and, always, a story)."

Especially with the younger children. A story was the means to deliver important messages.

"*Ki tum padhaai karo, aagey kuch achcha karna hai* (If you study well, you can be something)."

All this was good, but the children were weak in studies. They were struggling in exams.

The new Principal told her teachers, "I want 100% results this year."

But how was this goal to be reached? By setting small and achievable targets. Taking one step at a time.

Because it is impossible for a student who scored 20 marks this year to get 90 the next year. But she can aim for 25. Then make it 30. And keep repeating this process, keep increasing the target.

One day, Chitra Gupta entered the Class 10 classroom and wrote on the board the number '33'.

Then she wrote a second figure on the blackboard: '365'.

"If we divide 365 days by 33 marks, you have 10 days to study for 1 mark. Correct?"

The girls said, "*Haan madam, aise to kabhi socha nahi* (Yes, we never thought of it that way)!"

Since the board exam consists of 5 subjects, you actually have 2 days per subject to study for 1 mark.

"*Itni padhaai aap kar sakte ho* (Can you study that much)?" asked the Principal.

> Main unhe har cheez ka logic deti thi… Kyunki bagair logic ke aaj kal koi blindly follow nahin karta *(I convinced people with logic… because nobody wants to blindly follow).*

The girls responded with josh—"Yes! We can do it!"

In fact, 2 days for 1 mark is too much. *Ek din mein hi ho jayega*. By that logic, instead of 33 marks, each girl could aim for 66!

Principal madam declared, "*Fail hona jyada mushkil hai. Agar bilkul pran karlo ki mujhe fail hona hai, tabhi bachha fail ho sakta hai* (Only if you try very hard to fail can you fail)."

Chitra sat with the teachers to break down the syllabus, chapter by chapter, page by page.

"*Kaise notes banane hai, kaise yaad karna hai, kaise exam likhna hai… sab kuch hamne kiya* (How to make notes, remember the lesson and write the exam… we did it all systematically)."

In addition to all of this, every student of Class 10 and 12 was 'adopted' by one

teacher. Thus, every teacher in the school, from KG to the highest class, took 4-5 girls under her wing. The worst-performing students were directly under Chitra. And how did this work? Simple.

"*System yeh tha ki bachhi roz aakar teacher ko apni shakal dikhayegi* (Student and teacher must meet face-to-face every day)."

If the child is absent, the teacher will call her home to ask what is the problem. This put a stop to unnecessary absenteeism. And, more importantly, there was a feeling that 'someone cares'.

All these small seeds of change bore fruit at the end of the very first year. Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2 achieved 100% results in both Class 10 and Class 12.

Now, Chitra shifted the focus from quantity to quality. And much of that involved upgrading the skills of teachers. She started sending her staff to observe (and learn from) teachers of schools with 100% results. And encouraged them to register as examiners for CBSE paper correction.

The logic was simple. If you understand the right method of teaching and the evaluation process of CBSE, you can prepare your students better.

The teachers came back and said, "*Madam, wahan jaane se bahut fayada hua* (We benefitted a lot from the experience)." They were also able to earn some extra money.

The task of 'training' teachers is a delicate and continuous one.

Chitra gave her staff a free hand. But gently, invisibly, she kept track of their progress. Like a human CCTV camera, she sat and observed their classes. At timely intervals.

Each teacher was called to Chitra's office for an honest feedback. Behind closed doors.

"First, I would praise the teacher for what she has done well. Then I would suggest *ki isko bhi agar aap karoge to aur achcha hoga* (If you improve these aspects, it will be even better)."

One day, a teacher remarked, "Madam, you are very good. *Aapne kabhi hume bachhon ke saamne nahi daanta* (You have never pulled me up in front of the children)."

Chitra replied, "I want students to always respect you. But you must maintain high standards."

For you cannot demand respect. You must command respect. Through your attitude, your actions, your words.

It could be a small gesture. Such as treating even a child with courtesy.

"*Normal practice mein bachha khada rehta hai, Principal baithi rehti hai* (Normally the child stands while the Principal sits in her chair)." But Chitra would first offer the child a seat. Make her comfortable, allow her to open up.

The children were empowered to directly report to the Principal if a teacher was more than 5 minutes late to the class. Or refusing to explain something twice.

Andar hi andar kaaya palat gayi thi (From the inside, the school was transformed). But from the outside, Zeenat Mahal was still an old, crumbling building. This had to change.

"*Baithe baithe nahi hota hai* (Nothing happens by itself). I had to run from office to office, liaison with the Public Works Department and Department of Education."

Through these efforts, Chitra got the school toilets, windows and flooring repaired. She also got CCTV cameras and water coolers installed.

Due to the volume of work, Chitra put in many extra hours after school. While the students left at 12.30 pm, the Principal was always in her office till 4 pm.

The teachers asked, "*Madam itni der tak kya karte ho* (Why do you stay so late)?"

Chitra replied, "*Aap log kaam jo chhod ke jaate ho, main wo khatam karti hoon* (I finish the work that you leave behind for me)."

The Muslim students at Zeenat Mahal were classified 'Educationally Backward Minority' and received a 'scholarship'. In addition, they got money for their uniform,

textbooks and stationery. However, one had to submit proper documents to avail these benefits. Since there was no clerical or support staff, teachers were burdened with this paperwork.

"*Har cheez ke forms hote hain. Har form par 5-5, 10-10 signatures bhi karne hain* (We have forms for everything. Each form requires 5-10 signatures)."

> Pyar karne ke sau tareeke hain, dantne ke sau tareeke hain, har bachhe ko ek individual ki tarah samjho *(There are 100 ways to love someone, 100 ways to scold someone; you need to use the right method for each child).*

A mountain of forms arrived each week at the Principal's office for scrutiny.

Chitra had a clear policy: during school hours, be with students and teachers. Administrative work, only after school. There was no 'official' order for teachers to follow. But they did it, voluntarily.

"*Mujhe dekh kar unhe laga, humein bhi karna chahiye* (They saw me, and felt they should do the same)."

Slowly but surely, a new work culture developed at Zeenat Mahal. *Kaam hamara hai, humein karna hai* (All the work is our work and we will not cut corners). No matter what it takes.

With 100% confidence in her teachers, Chitra appealed to parents: "Don't waste your money on private tutors. Our teachers are taking extra classes." And, over time, the practice of tuitions declined.

The right partner makes all the difference

In year 3 of Chitra's tenure, Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya No. 2 was not just achieving cent per cent results. It became the number 1 government school in Delhi as per the 'quality index' (average marks obtained by each student).

One question remained to be answered: '*Padhaai ka kya fayda* (What is the use of studying)?' Chitra Gupta showed her students that marks are a stepping stone to a better future. At open house meetings with parents and students, she explained the importance of education.

While her own parents were Class 8 pass, Chitra did her post-graduation and became a Principal.

"*Kya aap nahi chahte ki aapki bachhiya meri jagah pe aa jaaye* (Wouldn't you like to see your daughters in the same position as me)?"

She emphasised that well-educated girls would get marriage proposals from well-educated boys. Wasn't that a good thing? Furthermore, education is like an insurance policy. *Khuda na khaasta*, if the husband dies, or he leaves the girl, she can stand on her own 2 feet.

"*Zaroorat pade toh izzat ki roti kama kar kha sake* (If the need arises she can support herself and live with dignity)."

A mother in the audience started sobbing. She was a widow who washed *bartans* and did *jhadu-poncha* in order to feed her children. A father stood up and said, "*Meri ladki ke saath bhi aisa hua hai* (The same thing has happened to my daughter)."

A steely resolve enveloped the room: '*Aur aisa nahin chalega* (We can't go on like this)'. The girls started applying their mind to studies with more dedication.

On another occasion, Chitra told the girls the real meaning of 'Educationally Backward Minority Scholarship'. The scholarship was ₹400 per year, or ₹1.25 a day.

"*Chand paise ke liye aap poore saal apne naam ke aage likhte ho 'Educationally Backward Minority'* (For ₹1.25 a day, you let people label you as 'Educationally Backward Minority')."

Instead, aim for merit scholarships, like the Lal Bahadur Shastri scholarship given to students who achieve 80% and above.

Teachers were shocked and apprehensive. "*Yeh aapne kya keh diya* (What have you gone and said)!"

But Chitra Gupta did not care about political correctness; she cared about her girls. And they rose to the challenge. Names from Zeenat Mahal began appearing on the merit list.

To spark that inner fire, you need a matchstick of hope. You need role models. From the very first year, Chitra Gupta strived to bring motivational figures as chief guests for the school annual day.

"I located a Muslim lady professor from Mata Sundari College. Students could relate to her."

In doing so, she upset the local MLA, who used to be invited for school functions. When he expressed his displeasure, Chitra Gupta said. "*Aap hi ka school hai…* it is your school, sir. You are always welcome. But I invite college professors to motivate students. I want my girls to go to college."

The MLA backed down, seeing the merit in her approach. And true to her word, Chitra Gupta did push her students to go for higher education.

> Teachers ke saath mein unnecessary toka-taki nahi karti thi. Unko mujhpar bharosa tha *(I did not point out small-small faults in teachers. I placed my full trust in their abilities).*

As the school results started improving, the Principal realised that the girls had the marks to get into well-known colleges of Delhi University. So she printed the last few years' cut-offs and stuck it on the notice board. And when the actual result was declared, she advised them on which colleges to apply to.

But there was resistance. At best, parents were willing to send their daughters to the nearby college. Even though they had the marks for Hansraj and Indraprastha.

Chitra explained that the quality of education at DU North Campus colleges would open up more opportunities for the girls. But that didn't convince anyone.

"*Madam, itni door jaane mein zyada kharcha hoga* (Going so far will cost more money)."

Chitra then sat down and explained the economics. The cycle rickshaw to the nearby college would cost ₹30 one-way. While the metro to DU North Campus cost only ₹10.

"*Roz ka bees rupaya sasta hai ya saatth rupaya* (What's cheaper, ₹20 a day or ₹60 a day)?"

Several girls then filled the form and some went on to get admission. One girl had financial issues and could not pay the fees. Chitra advised her to meet the Dean of Students' Welfare at Delhi University with a written application. The student was able to get a fee waiver.

Some girls did not want to go for BA; they wanted to start working quickly. Chitra advised these students to enrol in a 2 year diploma course in Elementary Teacher Education (ETE). This would enable them to become primary school teachers.

7 girls who completed this course are now teaching at their alma mater, Zeenat Mahal.

"*In teachers mein bahut zyada belongingness hai ki yeh mera school hai, mere bachhe*

hain (These teachers have a heightened sense of belonging—this is my school, my children)."

At the same time, teachers and students felt that Principal madam 'belongs' to us.

In 2010, a local NGO had sent across a pamphlet inviting nominations for an award for 'Best Principal'. Chitra Gupta applied, along with supporting documents.

But when 2 teachers from the school went to the NGO's office to submit the nomination, it was rejected outright.

"*Woh Hindu Principal hain, yeh NGO toh Muslim ka hai, hum to sirf Muslim principals ko denge* (She is a Hindu, we are a Muslim NGO, we cannot consider her)," was the explanation.

The teachers insisted. "*Aap rakh lo, kamse kam ek baar dekho toh sahi* (Keep it, at least take a look)! She has turned around the school. Please don't see her as a Hindu or Muslim!"

Ultimately, the award went to Chitra.[1] And she was told how the teachers had pushed her case.

"*Maine mann mein socha ki sabse pehle toh mere teachers ne mere ko award diya* (My teachers gave me an award even before I received the actual award)!"

Many more felicitations and recognitions[2] followed, but the most touching tribute came from a Zeenat Mahal teacher. Who publicly hugged Chitra and said, "*Sabki ek maa hoti hai, meri do maa hain* (Everyone has one mother, I have two mothers)."

As her reputation soared, so did the pressures. Several schools in Delhi function only up to Class 8. Those girls who wish to study further are sent to senior secondary schools like Zeenat Mahal. But there simply weren't enough classrooms or benches to accommodate 100 extra girls. Hence, Chitra requested the District Deputy Director of Education not to send any more students.

When parents heard the news, they protested loudly. They marched into Chitra's office and the office of the Deputy Director of Education. And *gheraoed* them.

"*Hamein toh ussi school mein padhana hai. Aap kaise nahi padhaoge* (We want our girls to study in that school and that school only)."

The parents went so far as to say, "Let our girls sit in the courtyard. Let it be hot or cold, they are poor children, they won't mind."

Par aapke saath unka bhvaishya sudhar jayega (With you they will have a better future).

Ultimately, Chitra gave in. What she did not give in to was pressure from politicians.

The area MLA complained, "*Madam, main jisko admission ke liye bhejta hoon, aap manaa kar deti hain, aisa thode hi chalta hai* (When I send children for admission, you reject them. This is not done)."

Chitra replied, "*Sir, aap sarkar chalate ho, rule aapne banaya hai. Aap rule change kar do, main le loongi* (It is your government, you made these rules. Change the rule, I will take the child)."

Once again, the MLA understood the reasoning and did not press further.

On the other hand, there were times when Chitra did *not* follow the rulebook. For a good reason.

A girl used to come late to school almost every day. But Chitra gave special instructions to the teacher—do not punish her. The child worked at a hakim's clinic after school—up to 11 pm.

"But she was bright and told me *ki main doctor banana chahti hoon* (I want to be a doctor)."

In a proud moment for Zeenat Mahal, that student is now a qualified ayurvedic doctor.

> Mujhe nahin lagta ki maine kuch vishesh kara, bas kuch common sense tha aur kuch dil se *(I did not do anything special, I just used common sense and worked with my whole heart).*

While Chitra never allowed teachers to leave early for personal work, she made an exception for one lady suffering from cancer. As the only earning member of her family, the teacher was missing her chemotherapy sessions—she could not afford to take leave and lose her pay.

"I told her—go for treatment. I will take care of your absence from school."

The teacher made a full recovery. And the staff understood: *Jo sahi hai, madam wahi karti hain* (Madam does what is right, what the situation demands).

One year, there was a proposal from Intel to conduct an after-school program on technology and entrepreneurship in Delhi government schools, under the aegis of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and CBSE. Even though the Department of Education rejected the idea, Chitra Gupta gave the green signal for her school.

"*Ladkiyon mein jabardast confidence aa gaya, unko laga ki computer chalana aa gaya, ab main koi ghar se business bhi kar sakti hoon* (The girls gained a lot of confidence and felt they can even run their own business using computers)."

Learning is a life-long activity. During her tenure as Principal, Chitra was selected for a Leadership Training program at IIM Kolkata. On the last day, when the coordinator asked for feedback, the Zeenat Mahal Principal was brutally honest.

"Half of what we heard was irrelevant, the other half was theoretical. I didn't learn anything new."

To her surprise, a week later, the coordinator called and requested help in redesigning the course. The State Council for Education, Research and Training, SCERT, also approached her to write a paper and present it at their national seminar.

"That is now called the 'Zeenat Mahal model of school management' and is included in the syllabus for the training of principals."

After 7 eventful years as Principal, in February 2014, Chitra Gupta was promoted to 'Officer on Special Duty' in the Directorate of Education.

Zeenat Mahal bid their beloved Principal a tearful farewell. Her new job was to liaise between 145 schools and the Directorate of Education.

"But I did visit Zeenat Mahal off and on. I talked to the students and teachers. They still called me for advice, when they faced any problem."

The teachers say, "*Aap itni acchhi tarah se sikha kar gaye ki kaam abhi bhi achcha chal raha hai* (You taught us so well, we are continuing our work with confidence)."

In May 2016, she was promoted to Deputy Director of Education (Zone 27).[3] Where her main focus was how to implement the many ideas developed at Zeenat Mahal. The question is—can such a model be replicated?

Yes—and no. For every school has its common issues and some peculiar problems of its own.

"Others can learn from my experience. But some decisions a Principal must take on the spur of the moment. *Kuch dimaag se, kuch dil se* (Some from the rational mind, others from the heart)."

As they say, the proof is in the pudding. The rank of Zone 27 shot up from 16 in 2016 to 9 in 2017. Ranks are awarded on the basis of the Quality Index (average marks per student). The pass percentage of schools under Chitra's jurisdiction also went up by 3.20 in

one year, which was 5% above that of all the government schools in Delhi.

"Among all the Urdu medium government schools in Delhi, the top 3 were from my Zone," says Chitra with pride.

Throughout this journey, Chitra's family has given her unstinting support. Her husband Rajan never once chided her for spending 'too much time' at school.

"Rajan has been my mentor, my friend and guide. My strength and inspiration."

Perhaps it was also destiny. For Chitra became Principal just when her daughter was completing her MBBS and shifting to the US for higher studies. Thus, relieving her of maternal responsibilities.

But all said and done, a lesser person would surely take the easy way out. Doing your job is fine and good, but will you do it at *any* cost? Will you put your very life at stake?

For, soon after joining, when Chitra Gupta undertook a clean-up drive, it had alarming effects. Handling dusty files and moth-eaten books, she developed psoriasis on her hands and feet.

And it got worse. With constant exposure to the *gandagi* (filth) of Old Delhi, Chitra developed TB in the protective membrane around her heart. That too, a difficult strain normally seen only in pigeons and goats. Her situation worsened at this time, due to the detection of cancer.

"*Doctors ne toh jawaab de diya tha* (Doctors said 'she will not survive')."

But somehow Chitra pulled through. When she returned to school, a mother came to meet her.

She said, "*Madam jab aap bimaar thi toh maine aur mere bhai ne aapke liye bahut dua kari thi* (When you were ill, my brother and I asked Allah to shower his blessings on you)."

Chitra smiled, "*Isiliye aaj main bach gayi* (That's why I am here today)."

For love is the ultimate secret of leadership.

In the home, in the office, in the country, in the world.

EPILOGUE

Chitra Gupta retired from the Directorate of Education in July 2017, after 37 years in service. Her contribution continues, as a member of various committees at the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

She is also discovering the joy of being a first-time grandmother.

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[1] NGOs working in the field of education of Muslim children bestowed the award 'Best Principal' to Chitra Gupta for 5 consecutive years.

[2] The State Award for Teachers (2012) from the Delhi Chief Minister, The Times of India–JP Morgan 'Social Impact Award' (2013) and the National Award for Teachers (2014) from the President of India, among numerous others.

[3] Government schools in Delhi have been divided into 29 zones, for administrative purposes. Zone 27 comprises all schools in the old walled city (Chandni Chowk, Jama Masjid and adjoining areas).

Yahan vahan saara jahan dekh liya
Ab tak bhi tere jaisa koi nahin…
Teacher tujhe salaam!
Vande..e..e..e… maataram

ADVICE TO YOUNG MANAGERS

Agar aadmi chahe ki main kuchh kar sakta hoon, kuch ban sakta hoon toh zaroor kuch banta hai (If you have a deep desire to do something, you will succeed).

Dusri baat ki kabhi bhi bahut lambe goal ke liye nahi sochein. Manzil chahe badi rakhein lekin goal apne chote chote banaye. Jaise ek ek goal achieve hota jaaye, woh ek self-motivating factor hota hai, aur aage badhne ke liye. (Second thing is that, don't have very lofty goals. The ultimate ambition may be big but the everyday goals should be small and reachable. As you achieve each small goal, it will motivate you to go further).

Kabhi yeh nahi soche ki dusre vyakti meri peeth thapthapayenge, tabhi main kaam karungi. Aapko jo karna hai apne conscience ke liye karna hai, kisi aur ke liye nahi karna hai (Don't crave for appreciation of others. Don't hold yourself back if that appreciation is not forthcoming. Whatever work you do is for your conscience, not for anyone else).

Kisi bhi field mein aap jaayiye agar aapne pehla kadam rakha toh uske baad ke kadam aur aasan, aur aasan hote chale jaayenge (In any field, once you take the first step, the next steps become easier and easier).

Koi kaam chhota ya bada nahin hota. Jo bhi cheez aapko mile usme excel karna hai, badhiya karna hai. Wo karna hai jisse zyada se zyada logon ka fayda ho (No work is too small or too big. Whatever work you have, excel in it. Do what will be of benefit to others).

Sarkari naukri mein kai logon ka yeh attitude hai ki salary toh utni hi milni hai. Toh achcha kaam kyun karoon (In government jobs, many people have this attitude ki, I will get the same salary… whether I work or not. So why work hard).

Kuch log sochte hain nahin, salary chahe jitne bhi mile, lekin jo mujhe kaam mila hai usme main 100% doon. Issi soch se aap aage badoge (But some people believe that no matter what salary I get, I will give my work my 100%. These are the ones who move ahead in life, who make a difference).

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Because every child deserves the gift of knowledge

As per the Right to Education (RTE) Act, a school cannot refuse admission to any child. But in reality, it often happens. On 7 July 2010, there was a knock on Chitra Gupta's door.

An anxious woman entered and said, "*Meri bacchhi ko admission form dene se mana kar diya* (They are not giving my daughter the admission form)."

What could be the reason?

When the mother brought her child into the room, a shiver ran down Chitra's spine. The child had no legs and no arms but her eyes were twinkling. And there was a big smile on her face.

"*Lao, isko yahan bithao table pe* (Make her sit on my table)."

Chitra asked the child, "*Beta, aapka naam kya hai* (What is your name)?"

Pat came the answer, "Nabhiya."

"*Gana gaana aata hai* (Can you sing a song)?"

The girl started singing without hesitation.

"*Padhna chahti ho?*"

"*Haan, madam!*"

Chitra turned to the mother and said, "*Ho gaya admission*. Go to the office and take the form."

2 minutes later, the admissions-in-charge barged into Chitra's office and said, "Madam, you are making a big mistake. How will we manage this child?"

The next morning, the school ayah came with the same question. "*Madam isko toilet kaun leke jayega* (Who will take her to the toilet)?"

"You will take her, of course," replied Chitra. "*Godi mein le jaana* (Carry her in your arms)."

The ayah put her foot down. "I will not do it. Call her mother."

Chitra looked her in the eye and said, "All right, then today is your last day in this school. *Jab tak koi nahin milta hai, main khud kar loongi* (Till I find a replacement, I will do it myself)."

Ultimately, Chitra arranged for a portable potty and the ayah did the job.

Since the girl could not 'sit' at a regular desk and chair, a *rui ka gadda* (giant wool cushion) was made for her. Now in Class 4, Nadiya has become the 'darling of the school'.

"*Uska dimaag bahut tez hai aur personality bhi* (She has a sharp mind and strong personality)."

Nabhiya regularly wins prizes in inter-school sports events for people with disabilities. She sings in the school assembly. Sitting on her cushion, she even minds the class!

Chitra has also arranged a wheelchair for her, from the Department of Education.

"Her abbu is a daily wage worker. I used to tell him, 'Make sure she completes her schooling. She will be eligible for a government job'."

For all it takes is faith. And a little support. To give every child a fighting chance.

RESOURCE LIST

For those of you who would like to drop a line of appreciation or share how these stories have impacted you. On social media please use the hashtag #ShineBrightBook

Pawan K Goenka
@GoenkaPk

Manu Kumar Jain
@manukumarjain

Vineet Gautam
@vineet_gautam

Nitin Paranjpe
nitin.paranjpe63@gmail.com

R Mukundan
@1mukund

Harsh Kumar Bhanwala
@hbhanwala

Amitabh Kant
@amitabhk87

Chitra Gupta
chitragupta58@gmail.com

RECOMMENDED READING

Salt of the Earth: The story of Tata Chemicals,
Philip Chacko
and Christabelle Noronha

Branding India: An Incredible Story, Amitabh Kant